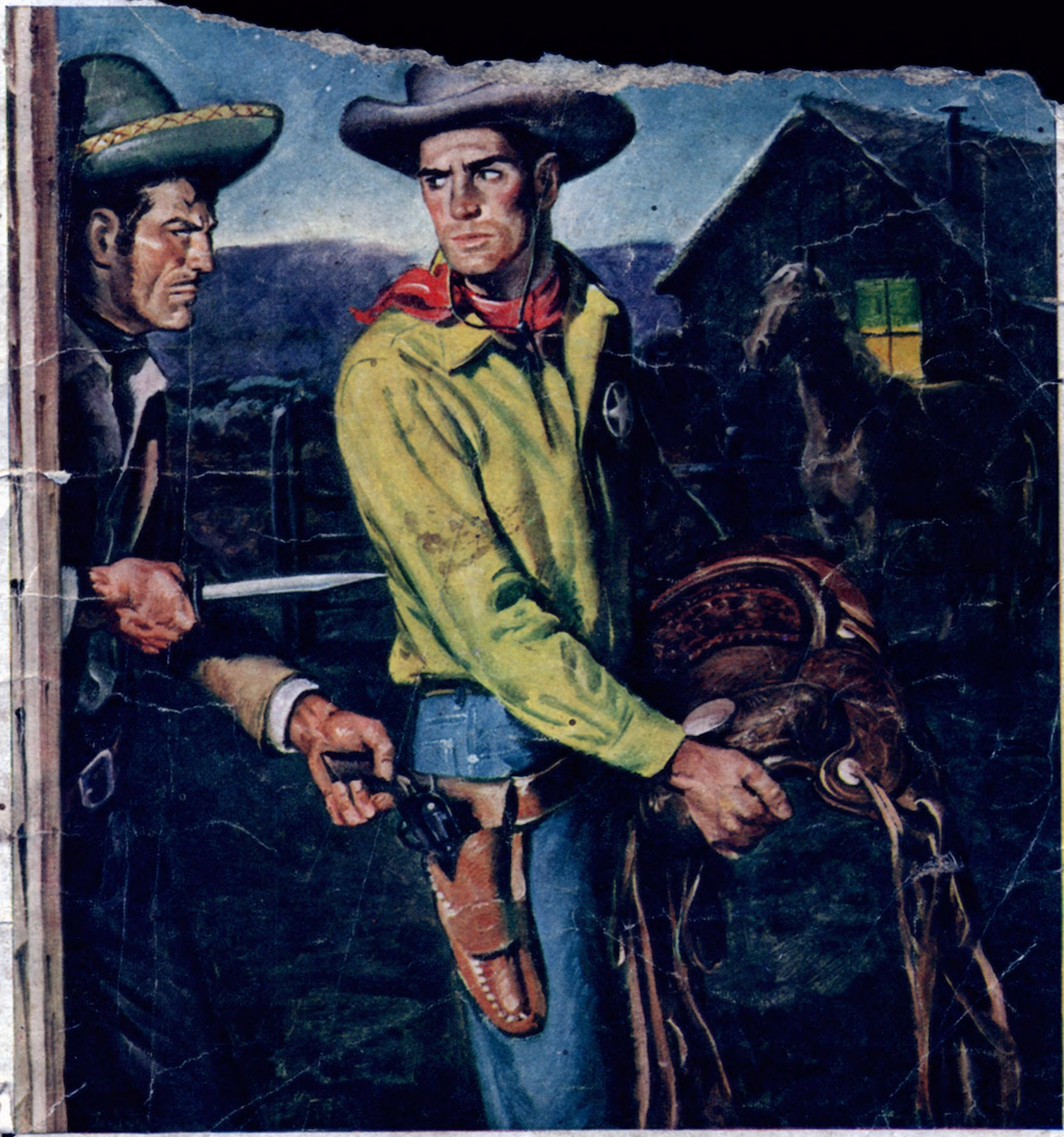

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A HARD-HITTING JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY JACKSON COLE

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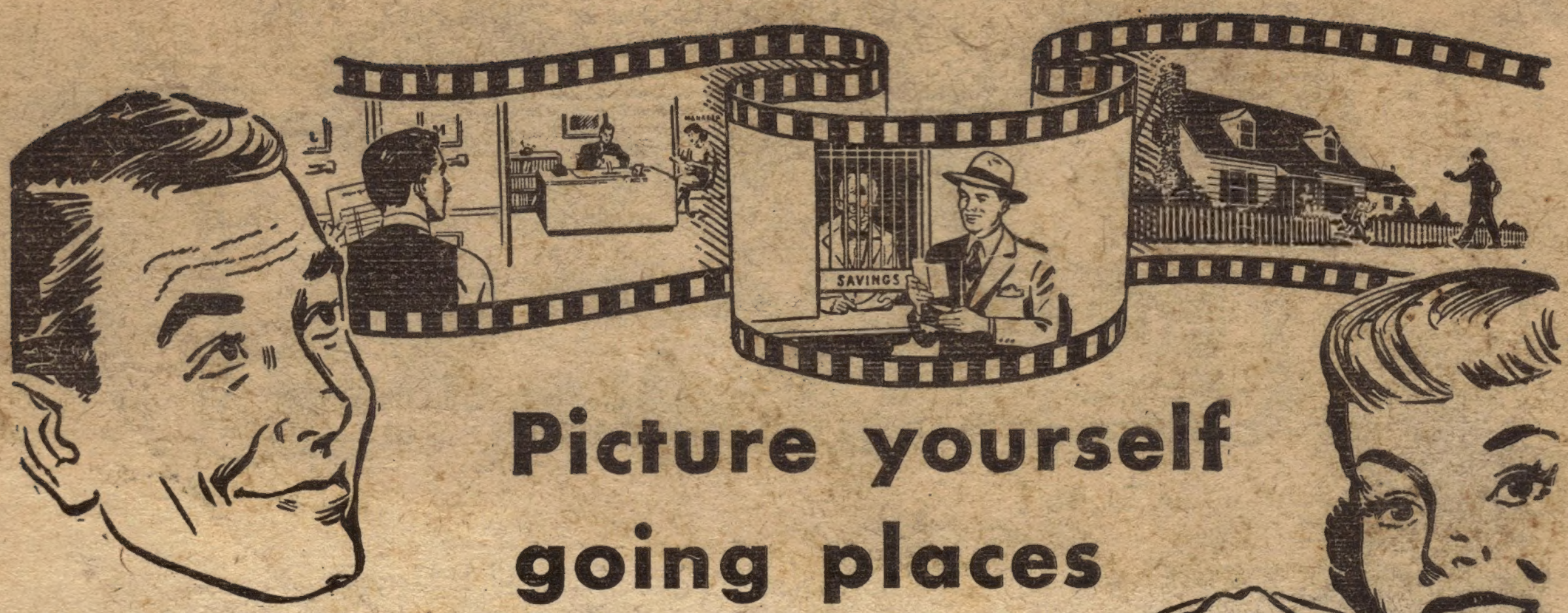

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Vol. 50, No. 2 APRIL, 1953

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

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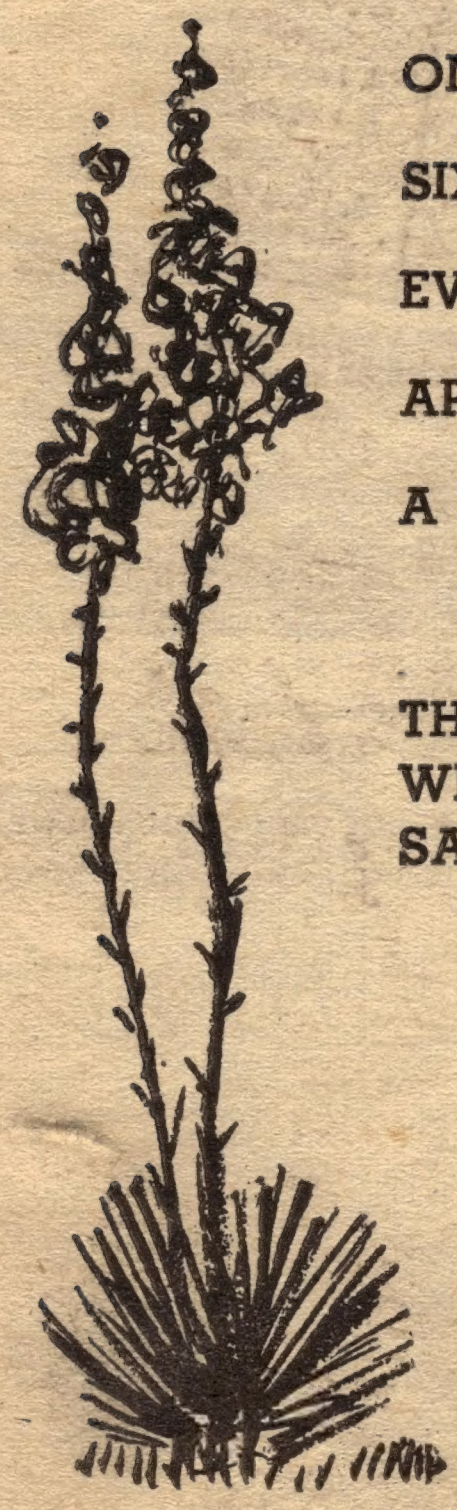
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

Justice, by Jones!

A True Western Tale

SAM JONES was a square-shooter who believed every man should get his just dues. Born in 1818, near what is now Big Lake, Texas, Sam was only eighteen years old when he joined up with General Sam Houston and helped defeat the Mexicans at the battle of San Jacinto which resulted in the independence of Texas. General Houston personally rewarded Sam for unusual bravery in that engagement.

Sam spent his next fifteen years herding cattle over the western plains of Texas, and helping drive large herds through to St. Louis. He always claimed the one thing he couldn't abide was a cattle rustler. According to his way of thinking, it was a waste of state money to give those hombres a trial. String them up to the closest cottonwood tree and get it over with, was his repeated advice.

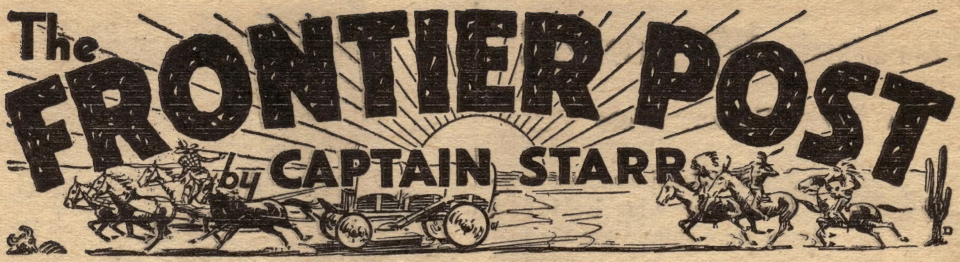
Sam was almost sixty years old when he was elected judge, and almost overnight his way of thinking changed. He intended to see that Texas had law and order, the same as other states. The citizens must stop taking the law into their own hands. No more necktie parties, Sam decreed.

One of Sam's toughest cases was when a well-to-do rancher was brought into his court, charged with stealing cattle. Hiring a smart lawyer from Austin and paying two friends to swear he was with them the night the cattle had been driven off, the thief stood a good chance of going free. Sam knew the rancher was guilty, but by the looks of things, the jury wasn't convinced. After the two lawyers' final pleas, Sam gave the jury their instructions.

"Gentlemen of the jury, the purpose of this court is to see that this man gets a fair trial," he said, "and I intend to see that he does. But I know you twelve men are smart enough not to be took in by no lying cattle rustler."

The jury was out twelve minutes, and that was the end of that cattle rustler's career.

—*Loma Andrus*



The Great Indian Robbery

DID America ever really belong to the Indians? The truth is, the question never has been decided by any rule of law, philosophy, reason or justice!

Now then, gals and galluses, if you doubt this sweeping statement, just string along with me for a few minutes in a review of American history.

One year after Christopher Columbus discovered this extensive continent in 1492 (by planting foot and flag on the beach of an offshore island), Pope Alexander VI up and gave the whole shebang, the entire Western hemisphere, to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.

It was the most enormous gift ever known. This amazing grant was made because the Indians who inhabited the New World were considered infidels, and therefore in the opinion of the generous donor they were not entitled to possess the land on which their Creator had placed them.

Double Trouble

England and Spain weren't hitting it off so good about that time, so naturally the English king wasn't plumb enthusiastic about letting half of the world fall into the royal laps of the rulers of an enemy country. Henry VII got his dander up. He sent a footloose cavalier named John Cabot to look over the unmapped land, and to take possession of same by right of exploration, instead of discovery.

As we see it now, the morality of such a one-sided deal amounted to about the same in either case. The English not only appropriated the far dominions, but they proceeded to make vassals of the numerous tribes and barbaric nations.

Barbarians or not, the Indians had gumption enough to object to such a raw deal. They figured it was their stamping ground. They founded their claim to the soil on nature, on the grounds of immemorial occupancy.

If it wasn't theirs, whose was it?

There at first, it was a three-cornered ruckus. But in the years that soon followed, it became a battle royal. The Dutch, Portuguese, French and later on the Russians horned in on the big, rich find. They validated their seizures not by right of discovery or exploration, but by right of *use*.

Of course, the Indians had used it, too, in their own fashion. But that circumstance was brushed aside. After all, here was a vast extent of valuable, largely vacant and weakly defended country. Naturally, the "civilized" countries coveted it.

By the time the Indians got around to fighting for what was theirs, it was too late. If they'd ganged up on the first arrivals, it would have been a cinch. But now they were overwhelmed by European immigrants of one breed and another who not only outnumbered them but who had superior weapons. Guns and that secret weapon of the times, rum.

Legal Shenanigans

Gradually worn down and wearied by bloodshed, the Indians consented to treaties, which solemnly conveyed back to them some of their ancestral wilderness acreage.

But as the value of land increased, and as more people came, white men ignored those treaties. Either they broke them outright or found loopholes in them. Sharp legal minds weaseled around and came up with the proposition that the Indians didn't actually own the regions they inhabited in the first place, that it was a common belonging to all mankind. From this convenient premise, it was concluded that the Indians had no right

to sell, barter or to dispose of any part of it by treaty, swap, handshaking or passing around the peace pipe.

But a maze of inconsistencies show up, as we examine the past. Most of our eastern seaboard was purchased—with money, chalk, marbles, firewater or beads—here and there, a hunk at a time. Those deals were okayed by what is known as "tacit consent." Whoever cooked up that law term sure hit on a doozey. It works like this. If you knock a man out with a club, rob him, and he comes to and sees you still standing there with poised club, he agrees that what you did was perfectly okay in order to avoid a new knob on his noggin. And that is what is known as "tacit consent."

The Constant Squabble

In our great West, most of which was claimed by Spain, land titles reached back to Spanish grants which were based on that whopping gift of Pope Alexander to Spain. To complicate it even more, the Spanish rulers, not to be outdone in generosity, gave the same grants away several times to different political henchmen. It took land commissions appointed by Washington (D. C., not George) to straighten out those tangles. There are descendants of claimants, both Spanish and Mexican, who believe they got an unfair shake. Yet old documents still come to light that contest the findings of the land commissions. A good many years ago, a character bobbed up, claiming he was heir to the entire State of Arizona. Things looked bad for awhile—until his musty records were branded as fakes.

But don't worry about it. Most of the rest of this old planet has been taken and retaken by outright, shameless conquest. In this enlightened age, it is pretty generally agreed that right of conquest isn't any right at all. Nevertheless, conquest still goes on in other parts of the world.

But to get back to the American Indian, about the only way we can right the wrongs he has suffered is to absorb him gradually into our democratic way of life. That's being done. He is a voter, now on his way to full citizenship. His benefits are and ever will be guaranteed by the strongest, clearest and noblest document conceived by man since his first feeble reach for freedom under the Magna Charta. By the Constitution of the United States of America, plus the Bill of Rights.

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but can't get started

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

●

What's in a name? Boxwell Bros. is an Amarillo, Texas, undertaking concern. And on the lighter side—to be taken with a dash of syrup—was the marriage in Ruidoso, New Mexico, of Mr. Buckwheat to Miss Pancake.

Montana has 24 fishing ponds for small fry. You have to be 12 years old or under to fish in them. It doesn't say anything about a mentality of 12 years or under, but we guess we won't chance it.

Now here are a couple of pretty corny items: Popcorn was introduced to the white man by Columbus, who found the Indians popping it to make necklaces. Whereas a friendly Indian named Samoset is credited with introducing corn to our ancestors in 1621. This latter was the pure vegetable, no doubt, and we don't mean the 100-proof stuff they make back in the hills, neither.

Captain A. H. Hardy, a friend of Buffalo Bill, could etch out on a board all sorts of portraits and landscape pictures by firing away with a sixgun. Which brings to mind the kind of "etch" you've got to scratch, and which the great buffalo herds had in such vast numbers they almost put the first telegraph company out of business. Using the telegraph poles as scratching posts, they used to wear them out by the score, or so 'tis said.

There's a million-year-old filling station at Lamar, Colorado—it's made out of petrified wood. Wooden you know?

Hamby Patterson, 70-year-old Gainseville blacksmith, made himself a set of false teeth out of aluminum pans. It doesn't happen to mention whether this Gainseville is the Florida, Georgia, or Cook County, Texas, one. But we've got our suspicions.

Hell's Canyon, on the Snake River between Idaho and Oregon, is deeper than the Grand Canyon of the Colorado and narrower across the rims. What a chassis—er, would you be so kind as to get lost for a couple minutes, Miss Contour—a chasm, that is. What a chasm!

Thomas Jefferson believed that mammoths, the prehistoric elephantlike beasts, roamed our great plains and he instructed the explorers, Lewis and Clark, to look for them on their Western explorations. Well, anyhow, they found Oregon.

Hatfield slammed his fist to Robusto's jaw

The Lone Wolf, posing as an outlaw, knew the beautiful widow hated rangers. But she wielded vast power and he needed help. . . .

Trail of the DESERT WITCH

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Dangerous Mission

THE two of them were big men, handsome men. They walked side by side, close, like friends—or, since they somewhat resembled each other, like brothers. In the rainy dark there was nobody on the street before the Capitol building in Austin to notice that the two were bound together not by friendship or by

ties of blood, but by a set of handcuffs.

It was past midnight. The magnificent red granite building was mostly dark.

The two men mounted its broad steps, then at the entrance one held back. The other said, firmly but not unkindly, "Come along, Tom."

He took the reluctant one inside, their boot heels and spurs making a clatter in the empty corridors. They turned into a lamplighted office where four men waited. One man sat at the desk; he was the Attorney General of the State of Texas. One man lounged in an armchair; he was Captain Bill McDowell, head of the Texas Rangers, a man white of hair and mustache that revealed his age, and bright, youthful eyes that somehow belied it. The other two were standing by the doorway at attention, one to either side of it. They were members of the Frontier Battalion, the Texas Rangers. The four men stared with a lively interest at the two who entered.

Seen in the lamplight, the resemblance between the two was less pronounced. They were of a size, yes. They had the same bold, well-formed features—in a general sense. But the one who took a key from his pocket and unlocked the manacles—he wearing a Ranger's badge, —appeared at the moment mild-mannered, and showed an easy smile. The other man's face was tougher and, scowling, he looked almost savage. There was no difficulty in telling which was lawman and which was outlaw.

The Attorney General, a heavy, florid man, said, marveling, "Yes, it might work. If Hatfield is willing to run the risks, he may have a chance of pulling it off."

The big man who had removed the handcuffs looked at him curiously, a question in his gray-green eyes.

Captain McDowell asked, "Did he give you any trouble, Jim?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Not enough to mention."

The prisoner swore. "If I'd had any warning, Jim Hatfield would be buzzard bait by now. But the damned Lone Wolf Injuned up on me and—"

McDowell cut in, "All right, Tall Tom. We know you're a bad hombre. You don't need to tell us." His youthful eyes were amused. "We've been reading all about you in the newspapers. Have you seen the papers, Dolan? Right now you're the most notorious outlaw in the entire United States."

Tall Tom Dolan cursed him.

MC DOWELL, seeing the questioning look in Jim Hatfield's eyes, said, "Jim, step off and take a good look at Tall Tom."

Hatfield obeyed, looking at the prisoner from a distance of perhaps six feet.

"What do you see?" McDowell asked.

Hatfield smiled. "He could be a relative of mine, heaven forbid."

His chief nodded, then rose and gestured to the two Rangers by the doorway. They stepped forward, each taking Dolan by the arm. The outlaw went berserk. With a shouted oath, he began a savage struggling against the two, and for a moment it seemed that they would not be able to subdue him. There was great strength in Dolan, a part of it sheer wildness.

The Attorney General looked alarmed, but Captain Bill McDowell merely smiled. He had the utmost faith in the ability of his Rangers to handle even such a powerful brute as Tall Tom Dolan.

Jim Hatfield watched with something like admiration for the outlaw. Badman Dolan might be, but Hatfield knew that there were mighty few men who could put up a fight against two Rangers—and Hatfield whom the old Ranger chief long ago had dubbed the Lone Wolf, couldn't help respecting any man who was that game.

They finally bested Dolan, and manacled his hands. By then both Rangers were out of breath, and looking a bit sheepish. Tall Tom Dolan was hardly winded.

McDowell said, "You've got your orders, boys. Take him to that secret place and keep him guarded night and day. Nobody's to come within a hundred feet of

the building, and—I don't need to remind you—you're sworn to secrecy. *Nobody* is to know that Dolan has been recaptured. All right. Take him away."

No man to waste time or to beat about the bush, the chief of the Texas Rangers turned to the Lone Wolf. McDowell was grim, though it had often been said of him that he would charge hell with a bucket of water.

"That's right, Jim," he said. "Tall Tom Dolan looks enough like you to be a close relation, even a brother. The resemblance ain't enough to fool anybody who knows

JIM HATFIELD

Dolan into believing you are 'Tom', but —well, I'm going to ask you to pretend you're him. That's why I had you bring him in at this hour of night—secretly. Now—"

"One moment, Captain," the Attorney General interrupted. "I think you should give Ranger Hatfield an opportunity to refuse this mission. I made it clear that this is no ordinary case, and that he should be sent only if he volunteers. The danger is great. It may mean certain death. At best, it's a gamble against odds."

McDowell chuckled. "Knowing the Lone Wolf," he said, "I'd gamble a month's pay he's already volunteered. What you say, Jim?"

"You know you can always count on me, Cap'n Bill."

The Attorney General shook his head, as though unable to imagine that any man, even a Ranger, would volunteer for a mission which was too risky to order a man upon it. He said, "Very well. As McDowell says, Hatfield, we want you to pose as Tall Tom Dolan."

Hatfield nodded. He was somewhat surprised. Dolan had been picked up by some Rangers merely because of his reputation, and because he was wanted by the law in Wyoming, Montana, Utah, Colorado, and perhaps elsewhere. He had been taken into custody on his first day in Texas, and before he could commit any crime in the Lone Star State.

A great hullabaloo had arisen over the man's arrest, due to his being one of Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch, a member of the notorious Hole-in-the-Wall gang. The excitement had been caused by the fact that Dolan had never before been arrested. The excitement had spread beyond Texas. Every newspaper in the country had heralded the outlaw's capture.

And then Tall Tom Dolan had escaped, only to be recaptured by the Lone Wolf.

Jim Hatfield began to suspect, from what was being said in this office now, that the escape had been engineered, with the outlaw's knowledge, by Captain McDowell and the Attorney General—for good reason. He couldn't guess at that reason, since Dolan had not been active in Texas.

THE Attorney General continued, "Your getting away with such an imposture depends upon your not running into anyone who knows the man. And your chances are good. Dolan came to Texas because of a girl he knew in Wyoming. She is now working in a dance-hall at Fort Worth. So you won't run into her. Dolan was born here, but he left the state when he was seventeen and he's changed considerably. And he has no relatives here." He glanced at McDowell. "Want

to take it from there, Bill?"

McDowell nodded, and said crisply, "Your danger first off, Jim, will be from Texas lawmen—Rangers, sheriffs, deputies, marshals. When you leave here, tonight, you'll be an outdaw on the dodge. We'll raise a hue and cry. And you'll have to elude pursuit and keep out of traps. You'll have to leave a trail though, somehow, so's word spreads that you're still in Texas."

Hatfield smiled. "You mean that I'm to let a lawman or two catch sight of me—as Dolan?"

"Right."

"Which way am I to head?"

"Into the Big Bend."

Hatfield said, "Outlaw country."

"That's it," McDowell told him. "And all this scheming is so's the Big Bend outlaws will believe you're Tall Tom Dolan. While you head in that direction, word will spread ahead of you. Them outlaws have their own grapevine and they'll find out you're on your way."

"And once I'm accepted as Dolan?"

"If," said the Attorney General. "If you are accepted."

Hatfield glanced at him. "Excuse me, sir, but I don't like to consider the possibility of failure. In this case, failure will mean—well, my death."

"Sorry. Go on, Bill."

McDowell went on, "Once you're accepted, you're to try to join up with a wild bunch headed by a man named Shayne. A soldier of fortune, Major Bucky Shayne. Find out where the Shayne crowd's hide-out is, and any other information you can get. You'll have one contact in Big Bend—Ben Tyson, a storekeeper at a town called Muleshoe. He'll relay information to me."

"I'm to trust Tyson completely?"

"Yeah, and nobody else." McDowell said. "Ben Tyson's been a listening post, so to speak, for the Rangers for several years. When we get your information from him, a company of Rangers'll move in and take Shayne's hide-out. "And—his voice turned harsh— "we've got to round up his whole gang, Jim!"

He began pacing the floor, one of the few times Hatfield had ever seen him really upset.

He said, "Ranger prestige is at stake, Jim. We've tried to trap Shayne and wipe out his bunch a half-dozen times, but because of that grapevine I mentioned, he's always managed to get away. And what could we do, not knowing the location of his hide-out. His bunch not only work Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, sometimes, but they also raid down in Mexico.

"Shayne, being a soldier of fortune, like I said, knows people in most Latin-American countries. He's in cahoots now with a Mexican *bandido* named Ramon Merardo. You've heard of Merardo, I reckon. Claims he's a revoluntionist. But all Mexican bandits say they're revolutionists. Merardo was a colonel in the Mexican Army once. Now he calls himself General Merardo, and says his bandits are soldiers. Says he leading an army of liberation. And he's got Chihuahua and Coahuila in a turmoil. He's wiped out Federal troops in a dozen battles, and even the Rurales can't handle him. Merardo is—"

"A question, Captain," Hatfield interrupted.

McDowell stopped pacing. "Yes?"

"How do you mean Shayne is in cahoots with Merardo?"

"He's furnishing Merardo with supplies—guns, ammunition, horseshoes, provisions—for his fool 'army', that's how."

"And for that Merardo lets Shayne raid across the Rio Grande?"

"That's it. This here 'liberator' lets a bandit from another country prey on his own people." Disgust was in McDowell's voice. "Like I said, the Rurales haven't been able to handle Merardo. That's got under their hide. And so, to get rid of the itch, they're making a big fuss about the Shayne gang." An expert at expressing his explosive feelings, McDowell swore feelingly "And that's why Ranger prestige is at stake, Jim. The head of the Mexican Rurales has sent me a message. It's a plumb ultimatum, in fact. He's warned that if the Rangers don't wipe out

the Shayne gang, the Rurales'll cross the Rio Grande into the Big Bend country, and do it themselves!"

HATFIELD'S bronzed face hardened. "Captain," he drawled, "it seems to me that Tall Tom Dolan had better get started for the Big Bend, pronto."

Both McDowell and the Attorney General nodded.

The Ranger chief said, "There ain't no time to lose. If the Rurales should cross into Texas, it'll cause international trouble. But it'll sure give the Texas Rangers a black eye if they should wipe out the Shayne crowd. Texans couldn't live it down."

"I'll get going," said Hatfield.

"One moment, Jim," McDowell said. "You're to get in touch with Ben Tyson only when you've got some information to send. First off, you'll head straight to a ranch in the Big Bend called the X Bar X—Folks call it the Doublecross Ranch. We got reason to suspect that the supplies Bucky Shayne furnishes to Merardo reach him through X Bar X Ranch." He paused, seeing a change of expression on the Lone Wolf's face. "You've heard about the X Bar X?"

Hatfield nodded. "Every Ranger has, sir."

"Yeah, that's true enough," McDowell said. "And it's not the best place in the world to send a Ranger, even though it's owned by a woman—and a beautiful woman, at that. But if Shayne *is* getting supplies through the X Bar X Ranch, there's the logical place for you to get a line on the Big Bend outlaws in a hurry."

Hatfield nodded. "Is there anything more, Cap'n Bill?"

"No," McDowell said. "Except to wish you luck, Jim."

They shook hands, and the Attorney General rose and came from behind his desk to offer his hand to the Lone Wolf.

Hatfield turned to the door, paused there to smile wryly at the two men. And to say, "Well, here goes Tall Tom Dolan."

He went on then, out of the Capitol building into the rainy darkness, thinking that now he would learn what it was like to be on the wrong side of the law.

And thinking, too, of what lay ahead, especially of the X Bar X Ranch and of the woman who owned it. Yes, he'd heard of her. Lanya Forbes. A widow. A beautiful woman, they said. And she hated Rangers with a hatred that was an obsession. Her rustler husband had been killed by Rangers.

Down in the vast, wild, lonely country that was the Big Bend, she was known as the Desert Witch.

CHAPTER II

The Widow Forbes

THE country nestled in the embrace of the sluggish Rio Grande, nine thousand square miles of forbidding desert and craggy mountains. Its population ran to one person for every twenty square miles, by census. The outlaws there were uncounted.

Jim Hatfield had ridden this Big Bend country some years before, tracking down a murderer. The land had not changed since. In fact, it had not changed greatly from prehistoric times, Hatfield reflected.

Five nights lay between him and his midnight conference with the Attorney General and Captain McDowell—five hectic nights, with the days even wilder. The net that had been spread for Tall Tom Dolan enveloped most of Texas. Every lawman had been alerted, and most ordinary citizens were watchful, eager for the "glory" of recapturing or killing the outlaw. The Lone Wolf, playing his rôle to the hilt, had had a dozen narrow escapes as he traveled toward the Big Bend.

Four Rangers, coached in their rôle as he had been in his, had kept on his trail. They'd made a great show of attempting to run him down, without really crowding him. And upon reaching a ranch, settlement or town, they'd deliberately revealed that they were on Dolan's trail. They

would "lose" his trail now that he was into the Big Bend.

Hatfield had ridden a zigzag trail, in the fashion of a man on the dodge. He had deliberately let himself be seen, and had acted furtively. At sight of riders, he had suddenly been in a great hurry. He had circled around numerous ranch headquarters, but always letting himself be seen. He had ridden through towns and settlements, hand to gun, and pretending nervousness. Men had tried to stop him. Riders had pursued him. Shots had been fired at him. Time and again he had escaped only because his great golden sorrel, Goldie, was faster than the mounts of the men bent on taking him.

He went unshaven and unwashed, and had taken on the hardened look of a man in flight. Hunger put hollows in his cheeks and, he imagined, gave him a wolfish look. He ate just enough to keep his strength up, and obtained grub by seeking an occasional hand-out at some lonely ranch where it wasn't likely that word of his presence in the neighborhood would be known.

At some ranches, it had been known, and he'd had to ride on fast, still hungry. On one occasion he'd obtained food at gun-point. On another, at a Mexican village, he'd gone into the only store and ordered a few provisions, then carried them from the place without paying. The storekeeper had raised a great fuss in the plaza. The provisions, in a flour-sack, the Lone Wolf had tied to his saddle-horn. He'd swung to the saddle, lifted Goldie to a hard run as the merchant's wild yelling had brought the villagers from their 'dobes.

Yes, he had traveled a dangerous, zigzag trail. But it had always carried him toward the Big Bend. And now, on this sixth day, he was deep into the country.

He followed a road south; a trace more than a road, since there were few wagons traveling in and out of the Big Bend. It led to Muleshoe, where Ben Tyson's store was located, and it passed the X Bar X Ranch. It led him through the wildest sort of country; sometimes there were cactus-studded flats, sometimes mesquite-grown thickets so tangled that a rider would have difficulty finding a way through them if he left the road; sometimes stretches of grotesquely eroded terrain cut by deep gullies and with craggy bluffs.

It was now mid-afternoon, and he had traveled most of last night, except for a few hours sleep, then on again at gray dawn, aiming at a range of bare hills.

He had seen no riders on the road nor off from it, but now, nearly to the hills, he glimpsed an occasional cow in the brush or out across some bunchgrass flat, so knew he must be approaching a ranch. He came to a fork in the road abruptly. One branch turned southwest while the other aimed southeast toward a V-shaped notch in the hills. He took the one to the southeast.

He was within perhaps a quarter of a mile of the cut when he was taken by surprise by three riders who rushed at him from a mesquite thicket—vaqueros on half-tamed mustangs. They covered him with guns. Two were young men, one old and gaunt and gray.

The old man said, "Where you go, hombre?"

HATFIELD looked at their grim faces, their hostile eyes, their threatening guns. They'd given him a start, but now he realized that if they were bent on killing him, they would have done so from ambush. This was a time to play his outlaw rôle the very best he could. He scowled at them as Tall Tom Dolan would have done.

"What business is it of yours?" he growled. "Answer me that."

The aged vaquero did not look less hostile but, in the way of his race, he was polite. "It is my business, señor, because you are riding X Bar X range, and I, Hernandez Gonzales, am *mayordomo* of the X Bar X."

"What is this X Bar X? A cross-dog outfit?"

"Como?"

"A man can't cross X Bar X range?"

"Strangers are not wanted, señor."

"I follow the road to Muleshoe," Hatfield said. Then, with a Dolan-like oath, "I aim to keep on following it!"

Gonzales holstered his gun, but the other two kept Hatfield covered. The three of them talked it over in Spanish. They took it for granted that he did not understand the language, it seemed, but Hatfield spoke it well. One of the young men was of a mind that they should turn the gringo back the way he had come. Somebody—a man called Robusto—would not like it if the stranger were permitted to ride on to X Bar X headquarters. The name "Dolan" fell from the excited lips of the other young vaquero, and he said that it would not be right to send the stranger, if he were the outlaw, back into the arms of the men hunting him. So Hatfield knew that word of his coming into the Big Bend had indeed traveled ahead of him.

Old Hernandez Gonzales had a straggly gray mustache, and he thoughtfully tugged at it. Finally he said that the señora would not like it if they were the cause of the Rangers catching up with a man, no matter how bad the man might be. The señora with her hatred of the Rangers. Gonzales turned to Hatfield.

"We will take you to headquarters," he said. "Then if Robusto says you must go back, you will go back. If he says that you may go on across our range—" He shrugged. "Come, señor. We ride."

He swung in beside the Lone Wolf, and the other two, still with drawn guns, followed. They jogged along the road toward the notch in the hills.

Hatfield said, "This Robusto—who is he?"

"He is head man at the X Bar X. *El jefe.*"

"I thought you were the *mayordomo*, the ranch boss."

A frown came to Gonzales's leathery face. After a moment's thought, he said, "That is true. I am the ranch boss. But between me and Señora Forbes, who owns the rancho, there is Robusto. It is one of those things, señor, that cannot be explained."

"He's her man, eh?"

"Yes—and no."

"Oh?"

"She is never without him," Gonzales said. "But other than that— Well, as I said, there are things that cannot be explained. He is always with her, and he does no work around the ranch. But if she has him for her man—" He shook his head. "I have seen nothing with my own eyes. Still, he is a handsome man, this Robusto, and the señora is a widow.

They fell silent. Between them and the cut in the hills a dust whirlwind raced across a flat, cavorted among some boulders, whipped across the road. But here in the Big Bend, Hatfield knew, they were called desert witches.

And, he recalled, the Widow Forbes was called the Desert Witch. He wondered why, and the prospect that he would soon find out about her excited him. He had his doubts that she would be as beautiful as he had heard she was. It didn't seem possible that a beautiful woman would be called a witch.

Still, a man was always hopeful. Beauty wasn't common.

THE X Bar X Ranch headquarters was located in a bow of the hills, and when Jim Hatfield saw it, as he emerged from the pass with the three vaqueros, he stared in amazement. He had expected the crudest sort of buildings here in the back country, but the Forbes woman had built well and handsomely.

Her ranch house was low and sprawling, beneath a red-tile roof, and it had a high-walled patio. Her outbuildings and the little houses of the married vaqueros had *viga* roofs instead of tile, but the buildings were arranged in an orderly fashion about the wide ranch yard and each had a well-kept look. The fences of the corrals were in fine repair.

Along a shallow creek that twisted past the place young cottonwoods grew, and Hatfield knew that they had been hand-planted. In a word, he decided, the X Bar X was a show place.

He remembered the story of Lanya Forbes. Her husband had owned a ranch on

the Llano, and he had been doing well. He had met her in Fort Worth, when he had trailed a herd there. She had been visiting a sister, the wife of an Army officer. She'd been from somewhere in the East. No doubt she had had plenty of suitors, but Sam Forbes had courted her and won her in a week's time.

She had journeyed to the Llano River country, as his bride. But marriage hadn't reformed the man, a born gambler. A high-stake gambler. In time, Forbes had gambled himself deep into debt and to buy back his IOU's he had sold off too many of his cattle and mortgaged his ranch. Then, in the hope of recouping his losses, he had turned to large-scale rustling—with the inevitable result. But instead of submitting to arrest, Forbes and his rustler crew had put up a fight. Again with the inevitable result.

Mrs. Forbes had refused to believe that her husband was a rustler, and she fought to clear her dead husband's name and to have the Rangers who killed him tried as murderers. She had managed to have them brought to trial, but they had been acquitted. The evidence had been strong against Sam Forbes. She had appealed to the Governor of Texas. A strong-willed woman, Lanya Forbes.

Failing to clear her husband's name, but still believing him innocent, she had bitterly denounced the Texas Rangers in front of the Governor, the Attorney General, and Captain McDowell. She had said she would move away from a range where, as she claimed, men wearing badges could persecute and kill innocent people.

She had sold out the Llano ranch, and moved to the wild Big Bend.

And here she had transformed her portion of the wilderness.

Hatfield saw Mexican children and women about the cluster of adobe huts, but the only man in sight was a blacksmith shoeing a horse in his shop. Evidently, all the ranch hands were out on the range. A saddle horse stood ground-hitched by the patio gate of the main house, however, and Hatfield guessed that it belonged to the man called Robusto. Then, as he and his escort reined in and dismounted, the Ranger saw that the animal was not in the X BAR X iron but was wearing a CS Connected brand.

Gonzales told the two vaqueros to remain by the gate, and gestured for Hatfield to follow him. Entering the patio, the Lone Wolf found it a pleasant spot. A flagstone walk ran through well-tended flower beds. There was a roofed well shaded by a sizable cottonwood tree. Along the adobe house was a long gallery, and three people—two men and a woman—stood upon it. They were in a violent argument. Or rather, the woman and one of the men were arguing. The other man was amused, grinning.

Old Hernandez Gonzales halted short of the gallery, stood with sombrero in hand, waiting to be noticed. Hatfield halted beside him and took out makings, studying the people on the gallery as he built a cigarette.

The woman *was* a beauty. Tall, shapely, proud of bearing, auburn-haired. The descriptions of her had not been exaggerated. On the contrary!

Angry though she was, her voice was low and perfectly controlled. Only its tone revealed her loss of temper, as she said, "Robusto, take Mr. Styles out to his horse and see that he rides off X Bar X range—and stays off it!"

STYLES interested Jim Hatfield. He was dressed like a townsman rather than a back-country man. In this country, rough and serviceable clothing was called for, but Styles wore a white shirt, a maroon string tie, a fine suit of gray broadcloth, and military-type boots. Only his broad-brimmed stetson fitted here. He was a man of about fifty, gray at the temples, and with a neat gray mustache. He was of medium height, slightly built, sallow of complexion. He reminded Hatfield of a tradesman, a banker, a professional man—anything but a rider of the wild Big Bend.

But there was an ugly look in his eyes, a certain viciousness to his voice. He said, "I warn you, Mrs. Forbes! I bought

"So you, handsome, are Tall Tom Dolan," she said

and paid for that strip of range and—"

"Robusto," the woman said.

The man she called Robusto laughed and stepped forward. He took Styles by the arm, and said, "You heard the lady, hombre. Let's go!"

Styles tried to wrench loose, but Robusto's grip was viselike. He turned the dudish man about, escorted him down from the gallery as though he were a small boy. His hold caused Style's face to stiffen with pain.

Robusto was well-named, Hatfield reflected. He was well over six feet tall, a bit taller than the Lone Wolf, and heavily built. Robust. He was about twenty-seven or -eight, huge for a Mexican, for the men of that race usually are not large of stature. But now, as Robusto and Styles passed him, Hatfield saw that the burly, handsome man was only part Mexican. His eyes were a surprising china blue. And bright with a look of deviltry.

As the two men passed through the patio gate, the woman looked at Jim Hatfield. Her eyes were as green as the attractive dress she wore.

"Hernandez, who is this?"

"We found him riding X Bar X range, señora."

"Oh? And why have you brought him here?"

"Señora—" Gonzales's manner was almost servile, as he held his sombrero to his chest, his head slightly bowed— "Robusto gave me orders that no strangers are to be permitted to cross X Bar X range."

"Indeed? But that doesn't explain why you've brought this man here."

"I thought you would not want him turned back, señora. Because of the Rangers. He is running from them, and—"

Lanya Forbes gave Hatfield another look. "You're Tall Tom Dolan?"

Hatfield took a long drag on his cigarette. He was quite certain that the genuine Tall Tom Dolan would not admit his identity to a stranger. So he said, "Smith is the name. Just plain Smith, ma'am."

The lovely green eyes were still angry. "Don't lie to me!" she snapped. "You're Dolan, the outlaw."

Robusto returned from sending Styles away.

Lanya Forbes said, "Bring this man inside." And to Gonzales, "You may go."

She turned into the house.

Robusto looked Hatfield over. "Tall Tom Dolan, eh?" he said. "We had word you were headed in this direction." He still grinned, as though grinning were habitual with him, but his blue eyes were wary as they sized up Hatfield. "Inside, hombre. You heard the lady."

Hatfield gazed at him for a moment, rubbed the wrong way by the man's arrogant manner. It would be easy to have trouble with Robusto. He decided that too much was at stake to risk it by picking a quarrel with him, however, so turned into the house. Robusto followed.

The room they entered was an office, a comfortably furnished office. There was a huge fireplace at one side of the room, book-filled shelves at the other. There was thick carpet underfoot, and besides the desk, at which the Forbes woman had seated herself, there were armchairs and a large sofa. An inviting room, and not too feminine. A man could have enjoyed his leisure hours there.

Lanya Forbes said, "Our visitor claims his name is Smith, Robusto."

"Ah?"

"I think it is something else."

Robusto was evidently a frequent visitor to this room. He went to the desk and perched with one hip upon the edge of it. He kept eying Hatfield, always grinning faintly. He said, "I think his name could be Dolan."

"He was crossing our range," the woman said. "I'd like to know why. And I don't like anybody to lie to me." She paused, looking from one man to the other. Then, "Robusto, do you think you can make this smart aleck admit that his name is not Smith?"

"*Si*, señora," said Robusto. "No man lies to Esteban Maldonado y O'Reilly!"

He came away from the desk, came at Hatfield.

His grin broadened, and a wicked gleam danced in his eyes. Here was a man, the Lone Wolf realized, as he braced himself, who loved a fight.

CHAPTER III

An Enticing Proposition

ROBUSTO wore a gun, its holster tied down in the fashion of quick-draw artists, and there was the hilt of a knife protruding from his right boot. But at the moment, he seemed to think his fists were weapons enough. From the first moment, however, the Lone Wolf thought otherwise.

Robusto might be big and powerful, and capable of handling most men. But he was also a fool, for he closed in fast without protecting himself. He was wide open as he launched a blow at Hatfield's face.

The Ranger dodged the punch, and jabbed at Robusto's left ribs. He connected twice, and heard the man grunt with shock. He shifted his attack to the man's face, rapping him smartly across the nose with his knuckles. His blows were intended to sting. He wanted to hurt his man, infuriate him. And he succeeded. Robusto yelled an oath, flung himself forward, tried to catch Hatfield in a bear hug. Backing, the Ranger stepped to avoid the man's arms, and jabbed twice more to the face.

Robusto halted flat-footed, stared in surprise. Hatfield glanced beyond him, at the woman seated at the desk. Her face was expressionless, but there was a lively excitement in her eyes.

She said coolly, "Well, are you going to let him get away with that, Robusto?"

Hatfield thought he knew now why she was called the Desert Witch.

Robusto, stung by her mocking tone, drove at Hatfield with a shout of rage. He was still clumsy, but this time he managed to duck a punch thrown at him and to take Hatfield about the middle with an embrace that he quickly tightened. He slammed his head against the Lone Wolf's chest, knocking off his hat, then moved his head down below Hatfield's breastbone and applied pressure.

For a moment Hatfield feared that the man had him, the pain was so intense. He tried to pry Robusto's arms loose, but they kept tightening, and the man's head continued to exert pressure. Desperate, Hatfield grabbed him by the hair and succeeded in pulling his head back. With his left hand he clubbed a blow to Robusto's ear. The man grunted with pain, loosened his hold, but drove a knee to the Lone Wolf's groin as he moved away.

Agony bent Hatfield double, and Robusto, with a gleeful yell, closed in and drove a blow to the back of his opponent's head. Hatfield went to his knees, but flung his arms about Robusto's legs. He heaved upward and threw the man over backward. Robusto landed on his head and shoulders with a great thump. Hatfield waited, smiling thinly.

"Come on, Robusto," he taunted. "You can do better than all that for the lady!"

Robusto lay there for a long moment, his grin gone and his eyes bright with hatred. Then he came to his left hand and his knees, and his right hand closed on the hilt of the knife in his boot.

The woman said sharply, "No, Robusto!"

He hesitated, glancing at her.

Hatfield said, "Let him go. I'll take that knife and—"

The man sprang at him, the long-bladed knife raised for a downward thrust. It wasn't the way to use a knife in combat. The blade should have been held outward from the forward part of the hand, for an upward thrust that it was impossible to parry. Hatfield had time enough to close in under the lifted arm, and to grab the wrist. He not only kept the blow from falling, but slammed his right fist to Robusto's jaw.

This time it was no light jab, but a punch with all the Lone Wolf's weight behind it. Robusto staggered. His knees buckled. Hatfield released his wrist, let him collapse to the floor, and kicked the knife from the dazed man's hand. After a moment, Robusto picked himself up by using a chair as a prop. He stood swaying. He was bleeding from the corner of his mouth.

Lanya Forbes rose and came from behind the desk, looked at him with something like disgust. "And you're forever bragging you're tough," she said. "Pick up your knife and leave me alone with this man. I can handle him, if you can't."

Surprisingly, Robusto obeyed. He was accustomed to taking her orders.

When he reached the door, she said, "And don't lay for him when he leaves. You understand?"

HE HALF-TURNED, stared at her with his face working. He glanced at Hatfield ,then back at her. "*Si*," he said. "I understand. You think he will fill my place." He paused, then added, "Señora, do not make an enemy of me."

And he went out.

She was silent a moment, thoughtfully. Then, with a shrug that seemed to dismiss the man from her thoughts, she said, "All right. You've won the right to call yourself Smith or anything else you like."

He smiled. "Call me Dolan, if you like."

She nodded. "You're quite a man. Tall Tom Dolan. As much a man as I heard. It's too bad you're an outlaw. You can't be trusted. Still, I've a notion to take a chance on you. Do you want a job, Dolan?"

"Filling Robusto's boots?"

"Not exactly. He's still a good man, even though he couldn't whip you. I haven't decided to get rid of him. It could be that I have use for you both."

"It'd end up with him killing me, or me killing him."

"No. I can hold him in check."

"Just what is he around here?"

She met his gaze steadily, but a flush stained her checks. "He's my bodyguard," she said. "I'm a widow. A woman without a man in this country— Well, I wouldn't have any security at all if it weren't for Robusto, or another man like him. He's that and nothing more. You'll have to take my word for it. But—" she gave another small shrug— "it doesn't matter to me whether you believe it or not. Do you want to go on my pay-roll?"

"Maybe you want me to take care of the other man who just left here?"

"Carter Styles? Well, maybe I do."

"And some others?"

"It's possible."

Hatfield considered a moment. He'd had orders to come to the X Bar X Ranch on the chance that here he could learn something of the Shayne outlaw crowd. But it seemed that if he hired on, he would be involved in this woman's affairs to such an extent that he might miss out on that chance. And there was too little time in which to obtain the information Captain McDowell needed so urgently.

Still undecided, he said, "Give me a little time to think it over."

"Why?" she said. "Have you something else to do?"

"I figured I'd drift deeper into the Big Bend."

"The Rangers won't come here for you," she said. And her hatred of the Texas Rangers made her voice ugly. "But think it over. Stay overnight. Give me your answer in the morning. You can sleep in the bunkhouse, get supper and breakfast at the cookshack." Then, after a moment of sizing him up, "You may go, Dolan."

He laughed, then went to the doorway. And said from there, "You're quite a woman, Mrs. Forbes. I've never known one quite like you."

A slight smile touched her lips. "And you'll never know another quite like me," she said. "My character has been shaped and tempered by trouble. I have what few women possess, a will of my own. I'm making my way in a man's world, and I have to be hard and smart, or I'd be crushed. I'm self-sufficient. I've offered you a job, but that doesn't mean I can't get along without you. If you decide to take it, don't get any notion that you'll be indispensible."

He waited, sensing that she wasn't finished.

She wasn't. "As I said, it's too bad you're an outlaw—as well as quite a man. As an honest man, you might have made yourself indispensible."

"A man can reform—with a woman's help."

"I'll need proof of that."

"Maybe I'll be able to furnish it, if I take the job."

Her eyes challenged him. "We'll see," she said.

He nodded, and went out.

THE RANGER took his horse to the corrals, off-saddled, then carried his bedroll to the big adobe bunkhouse. The point of a knife pricked his back the moment he entered the building, and the door slammed shut. He tensed.

"Robusto?"

"That's right, hombre. You feel this knife?"

"I feel it."

"A little more pressure, my friend, and you would be a dead one," said Robusto O'Reilly. The knife jabbed, causing Hatfield to wince. Then the pressure was eased. "So I let you live. In a way, you now owe me your life."

Hatfield did not move a muscle. He stood frozen, his bedroll on his left shoulder. "You have a queer kind of logic, you Irish-Mexican," he said. "Why didn't you knife me when I walked in?"

"The señora is taken by you. If I kill you, she will hate me."

"And besides, you want something of

me, now that I owe you my life?"

"*Si.* You are not to take the job she offered you."

"So you listened at the door, eh?"

"I make the señora's affairs my affairs," Robusto said. "I am a jealous man, Señor Dolan. If you stay here, I will lose out with the señora. Then I would surely kill you. She would hate me, and it would take me a long time to get her over hating me. I speak logic, no?"

"You speak logic, yes."

"And you will be sensible?"

Hatfield felt the prick of the knife again. "I'll be sensible," he said, and shoved his bedroll back off his shoulder into Robusto's face.

A Spanish oath fell from the man's lips and Hatfield, leaping away, whirled and grabbed out one of his twin Colts. Robusto backed against the door, the knife now a useless thing in his hand.

Hatfield smiled. "Put that knife back in your boot, amigo," he said. "I'll holster my gun. We'll talk things over in friendly fashion."

Robusto was a bit crestfallen as he bent and slid the knife into his boot. Then straightening, "We'll talk it over?"

"Tall Tom Dolan is no man to tie himself to a job," Hatfield said. "The law is too close behind me. Your Señora Forbes said that the Rangers won't come here. Me, I'm not so sure. I'm heading deeper into the wild country, first thing in the morning, and I aim to tell the lady so. If I travel far enough, maybe I'll find some of my own kind of hombres here in the Bend."

A look of relief spread over Robusto's face. "Maybe I can help you find your own kind," he said. "There are many outlaws in the Big Bend, but a man must know how to find them."

"You can help me find them?"

"I will send a couple vaqueros with you as guides," Robusto said. His grin returned. "We are friends now, no?"

Hatfield grinned back. "We are friends now, yes," he said.

But he was not so sure. . . .

The ranch hands came in at sundown, all of them Mexicans. Seven of them ate in the cookshack and slept in the bunkhouse. The others were family men, and they, after putting up their mounts, went to their 'dobes to spend the night with their wives and children. Hatfield ate with the bachelors, then went to the bunkhouse and turned in. He needed a good night's sleep, having missed so much rest while making his danger-filled way to the Big Bend country.

He felt safe enough here at the X Bar X, now that Robusto was convinced that he would not be a rival for the Forbes woman's favors. He didn't trust the man, but he felt certain that Robusto would make no attempt on his life, because of his fear that the woman would be angered.

Lying on his bunk, smoking a final cigarette, the Lone Wolf found himself thinking of Lanya Forbes. A beautiful woman. The most beautiful he had ever met. But she was dangerous. To win her way, she would pit man against man and make use of the stronger. The death of her husband had hardened her, and such hardness was not a good thing in a woman.

STILL, without it, she would be lost. Without being hard, she could never have founded this ranch, nor have held onto it. Such an outfit here in this wild country must be the envy of many men—men like Carter Styles for example. And no doubt she must forever be on her guard against them.

She had plenty of vaqueros to guard her range, but a determined man, with plenty of gunhands in his hire, might be able to handle the X Bar X riders. She was aware of that, and so she had Robusto to guard her personally.

Hatfield hadn't found the Irish-Mexican difficult to handle, but it was likely that Robusto O'Reilly was more than a match for ordinary tough hands. At any rate, he had kept the woman safe so far, and he wanted no help from a man who might give him competition for Lanya Forbes's affections. It was only she who felt a need to have another man like Robusto about the ranch.

But it was possible, Hatfield reflected, that she hadn't really felt the need of a second bodyguard. It might be that she was bored with Robusto O'Reilly, big and handsome though he was, and had seen in tall Tom Dolan—in the man she thought to be Dolan—something that aroused the tender feelings that surely lay beneath her hard exterior.

It occurred to Hatfield that it might be pleasant to accept the job she offered, even though it meant clashing with Robusto. But it was not for him, not for the Lone Wolf. He dared not let himself be tempted.

On that thought, he crushed out his cigarette and slept. . . .

After breakfast Hatfield was saddling Goldie over by the corrals when Robusto O'Reilly came from the ranch house. The man said, "So you didn't change your mind during the night, amigo?"

"No, I didn't, amigo."

They grinned at each other. Like a couple of unfriendly lobo wolves, Hatfield told himself. Then Robusto gestured toward two vaqueros over by the barn.

"Juan and Miguel will take you to an outlaw hide-out," he said. "I have told them how to find it. Since they know the country, they will have no trouble guiding you. But once you reach the place, you will be on your own. Tell the *jefe* of the outlaw band that Robusto sent you. Maybe that will help."

"What's his name, this outlaw *jefe?*"

"Major Bucky Shayne."

To cover his surprise, Hatfield said, "Major? What's this Shayne—an ex-Army officer?"

Robusto shrugged. "You will find out from him, I think," he said. "You will see the señora and tell her that you are leaving of your own free will? I would not want her to think that I scared you away from the X Bar X."

Hatfield chuckled. "I'll tell her you didn't scare me away."

He finished saddling his golden sorrel, turned toward the big adobe house, leading Goldie. Robusto fell into step with him.

"That's a fine animal, Dolan."

"I took it from a Ranger."

"You would trade it, maybe?"

"No," said Hatfield. "I've grown kind of fond of the bronc."

Robusto turned off to talk to the two men who were to act as guides. Hatfield left Goldie ground-hitched by the patio gate, and found Lanya Forbes at the doorway to her office. He had an idea she was waiting for him.

Her voice was accusing. "You're leaving."

"I'll feel safe only deeper in the Bend."

"The Rangers won't come here, I told you. I have reason to hate them, and they know it."

"I doubt if hatred will keep them away from here," Hatfield said. "Don't count on that. I'm sorry I can't take the job. I reckon you know that."

She stepped from the doorway, moved close to him. "I think I can hold you here, Dolan," she said. Her voice was husky, the look in her green eyes inviting. She lay a hand on his arm. "Stay, Dolan. You'll never regret it."

He felt a quiver of excitement. He imagined that the real Tall Tom Dolan would give in to her, but he was not Dolan. He had a mission to accomplish. He took her hand from his arm.

"Maybe I'll come back this way."

Anger came quickly to her. "If you go now, don't come back," she said. "Once you leave, you'll never be welcome here again!"

He said, "I'm sorry," and turned away.

He heard her say something, when he was halfway across the patio.

He had an idea that she called him an ugly name.

ROBUSTO watched Hatfield and his guides ride out, his grin stretched wide on his face and a wicked gleam in his blue eyes. One of the vaqueros led a spare horse under pack, which told Hatfield that they would be at least a couple days on the trail. They headed south across X Bar X range, and after a half-dozen miles, Hatfield saw the buildings

of another ranch a half-mile or more back from the road.

"Whose place is that?" he asked. "Carter Styles's?"

"*Si,*" one of his guides said. "Señor Styles lives there."

"He has a big outfit?"

"No, Señor Dolan. His is what you call it, a two-bit ranch."

"But he's making trouble for Señora Forbes. How come?"

"He claims more range than is his," the vaquero said. "He bought his ranch from a man who played him for a tenderfoot—which Señor Styles is. For another thousand dollars, this man told him, I will sell you some good grassland I own on the north side of Turbio Creek. Señor Styles paid him the money and was given a quitclaim for the second piece of range." The vaquero chuckled. "The joke is, Señor Dolan, the range north of the Turbio is a part of the X Bar X Ranch."

Hatfield smiled to show that he appreciated the joke. Then he said, "But he still thinks he owns that strip of range, eh? And wants to take it from Señora Forbes?"

"*Si.* But he has much to learn about the señora."

"She is not called the Desert Witch for nothing," the other vaquero said. "Señor Styles will get nowhere by talking tough to her."

"How come she's called that?" Hatfield asked.

The two Mexicans exchanged glances, both looking blank. Then the one named Juan, said, "It is perhaps because she is possessed of a devil, señor. She is no ordinary woman. Only a woman possessed would come alone into this country and start a ranch where there was nothing before."

They fell silent then, each of the three lost in his own thoughts. The road turned southeast finally, and at mid-day they saw a cluster of buildings ahead. It was the settlement called Muleshoe, Hatfield learned from his companions who now, aroused from their silence, talked of getting some tequila. Both had developed great thirsts, it seemed.

Hatfield was as anxious to stop at Muleshoe as they, but for another reason. He wanted an opportunity to size up his only link with outside Texas—the storekeeper named Ben Tyson.

CHAPTER IV

Guides to Death

MULESHOE, at a crossroads, consisted of a dozen adobe buildings. All were mere huts with the exception of one bearing a crudely lettered sign that read:

Tyson's Place
General Merchandise, Whisky and
Tequila, Remedies

It was a large building with a wooden awning along the front and two entrances, one to the store and the other to the barroom.

A rickety wagon with a pair of crow-bait horses in harness stood in front of the place, and a Mexican couple carrying purchases and followed by a swarm of barefoot kids came out to the wagon. They were followed by a man—a gringo—who carried still another swarthy youngster. This child had a freshly bandaged leg. The American man held the boy until the Mexican stowed his provisions into the wagon, then gave him to the man who was evidently the father of the brood.

The Mexican said something in Spanish.

The American shook his head, smiling, and said, "There is no charge for the doctoring, Mario. And you tell your brother, Diego, that if he wants legal advice, he's to come to me. I'll look into my law books, and it'll cost him nothing at all."

"*Gracias,* Señor Tyson," the Mexican said. "*Muchisimas gracias!*"

The two X Bar X vaqueros had already dismounted by the hitch-rack in front of

the barroom entrance, but Hatfield still sat his horse and was watching the man he realized was Ben Tyson with a lively interest. Tyson came along the gallery, a slightly built man of about thirty or a little more. A clean-cut man, his rather pale face unmarked by life in the harsh land where he did business.

"Hola, amigos!" he called to the vaqueros. "How are things at the X Bar X Ranch?"

The vaqueros greeted him with respect, one even removing his sombrero. They told him that things were all right at the X Bar X.

"And how is Señora Forbes?"

Hatfield noted that Tyson's lips spoke that name as though it were important to him, as though he were fond of its owner. Tyson nodded when one of the X Bar X men told him that the señora was well, and there was a flicker in his eyes that was as telltale as his voice. Here was another man who was under the spell of the Desert Witch.

Tyson glanced at him. "Step down, stranger. Come quench your thirst."

The vaquero, Juan, said, "This is Señor Dolan. We take him south."

"Not Tall Tom Dolan?"

"Maybe I'm not welcome at your bar, friend."

"I've welcomed men at my bar who had worse reputations than yours, Tall Tom."

Hatfield laughed, and swung from saddle. He had seen Ben Tyson wink as he spoke, and the wink told him that he knew him to be not an outlaw but a Ranger.

They went inside, and Tyson served the vaqueros tequila and tapped whisky from a keg for Hatfield and himself.

"You're a doctor and a lawyer as well as a merchant and a saloonman?" Hatfield asked. "A sort of jack-of-all-trades?"

"I'm many things to many men, Dolan."

"You must be a busy man."

"A busy man is never a lonely man," said Tyson. "Or so I've heard. Are you figuring on staying around these parts?"

Hatfield shrugged. "My *compadres* are taking me to some friends of Robusto O'Reilly's," he said. "Juan—Miguel, where is this place you are taking me?"

The vaqueros gave him blank looks, and Juan said, "We do not know, señor. We must find it by the landmarks that Robusto described. It is somewhere far south."

Hatfield gave Tyson a wry smile, then lifted his glass. "Your health, friend," he said.

Tyson gave him the same sort of smile. "Yours," he said, and lifted his glass.

It took the vaqueros nearly two hours to quench their thirst, and then, starting out, they took a jug of tequila along as protection against another dry trail. Ben Tyson watched the three of them ride away, and he was still in his doorway when Hatfield glanced back once they were well away from Muleshoe. . . .

THEY were going to murder him! Juan and Miguel had their orders, from Robusto O'Reilly. With so much tequila in them, they began discussing when and where and how to kill him. They talked in Spanish, which they assumed he could not understand.

Hatfield kept Miguel, who led the packhorse, between himself and Juan. And when the trail narrowed, for there was no longer a road, he dropped to the rear. He intended to keep them at a disadvantage, without them knowing that he was aware of their plan of murder.

Both men were drunk, which undoubtedly was why they kept talking it over, in their own tongue. The Ranger gathered that they were a little afraid, too. The tequila hadn't made them brave. They were not killers at heart, Juan and Miguel. It was just that Robusto had given them orders.

Hatfield smiled bleakly. Robusto talked a little like a fool, but maybe that was just because he couldn't express himself well in *Americano*. He was no fool, but a decidedly dangerous man. The vaqueros were to kill Tall Tom Dolan, Hatfield heard them saying, but Señora Forbes was not to know. She was to think he had joined Major Bucky Shayne's out-

law band. And so she would not be angry with Robusto.

The pair talked for miles, then became broodingly silent. The tequila was wearing off, and they worried. They avoided looking directly at the man they thought was Tall Tom Dolan. They gave him furtive glances. It occurred to Hatfield that if he were Dolan, they would be as good as dead men now, for those glances would have warned the outlaw, even if he hadn't savvied Mexican lingo. And he would certainly have killed them before they got a chance to kill him.

The day was finally gone, and they halted to make camp. Hatfield off-saddled Goldie while Miguel took care of the other horses and Juan gathered brush for a cookfire. Juan did the cooking, and when the grub was ready, the Lone Wolf filled and carried his tin plate and cup away from the fire. He hunkered down with his back to a boulder, and kept his gaze on the two while he ate.

After the meal, the two Mexicans brought out their jug of tequila and kept passing it back and forth. They kept the fire going. Hatfield had a smoke, then spread his bedroll beside the boulder. He settled his saddle for a pillow, and took his rifle into his blankets with him. He did not dare sleep however. He lay there listening to the vaqueros, and finally, as they become drunk again, their talk again was of Robusto's orders to kill him.

They argued about it. They feared Robusto; the man would be angry if they returned without having carried out his orders. But they also feared Señora Forbes. She would be angry if they killed the gringo. How would she know? Miguel asked that. Juan had an answer. The señora was a witch, and witches had ways of learning things. From the wind, maybe.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

TOBACCO SHOOTER

BRAZOS BILL pushed his hat back, shifted his cud of tobacco and cleanly rang the spittoon beneath the brass rail at his feet. "This feller with the rodeo was the best I ever seen for straight shootin'," he said. "One thing he done was put up a card, a six-spot, and turned around and walked back twenty paces, then spun on his heel and shot the pips out of that card as fast as he could pull the trigger."

Elmer Fuddle McWhinney, of the Dallas McWhinneys, took a swig of his beer and looked unimpressed. "Is that all he done to make you call him the best you ever seen?"

Brazos Bill shook his head and looked slantwise at the other. "He had him a girl helper in red tights—a real looker, though a mite on the skinny side—and she'd put a cigarette in her mouth and puff it a bit to get up a good ash, and this feller would then take careful aim and knock the ash right off that cigarette slicker'n slobbers."

"And her standing still all the while?"

"Why, shore she was standin' still," replied Brazos a bit bristly.

Elmer Fuddle McWhinney, of the Dallas McWhinneys, snorted. "That's child's play compared to the shooting an uncle of mine used to do. We called him Uncle Deadeye. He was a McWhinney, of course. One of his favorite tricks with a cigarette was to have someone toss it in the air for him to shoot at. The cigarette would fall to the ground again and someone was sure to say, 'Hah, you missed it!' because there it would lay looking good as ever. 'Take a good look at that cigarette,' Uncle Deadeye would tell him. 'Ain't much good for smokin' any more, less'n you like just the pure paper.' And sure enough, he would've shot the tobacco right out of it while it was twisting through the air, the bullet going in one end and out the other without even busting the paper. Had to use a .22 for that trick, of course, cigarettes being thin as they are."

"Yeh, of course," echoed Brazos Bill doubtfully, as he tried to uncross his eyes. "Any fool would know that."

They talked and they drank and like all their kind, they were superstitious. They began telling fantastic stories that were often told by campfires in the brush country—of eerie happenings, of ghosts, and of course of witches. They frightened themselves. Finally they spread their blankets close to the fire, their orders to do murder forgotten.

Hatfield slept by snatches, but there was no need for him to be on guard. Juan and Miguel were in a drunken sleep. He heard their loud snoring each time he awoke.

Both vaqueros were sick and worried when Hatfield roused them in the morning, after rebuilding the fire and cooking his own breakfast. They wanted nothing to eat, and they had to force themselves to drink coffee. Just as the Ranger had anticipated.

They were slow in breaking camp, and when at last they were in the saddle, they looked as though they wanted to dismount and lie down again. Hatfield would have been amused had he not known what they planned for him.

He said, "How much farther is Shayne's hide-out?"

Juan said, "A day's ride, I think."

"Tell me how to find it, and I'll go on alone."

He could see that they were tempted, but after exchanging glances, they shook their heads. And Juan said, "Robusto would not like it, señor. We were told to take you the whole way."

HATFIELD insisted, "But how much farther is it?"

"We will reach the place by sundown," Juan said. "We follow this trail until we come to a butte. We turn east beyond the butte, and there is a big arroyo. We ride along the arroyo to its far end, then turn south again. To the mountains. The hide-out is in a canyon. You will not find it without us, I think."

"All right," Hatfield said. "Let's get going."

He kept them ahead of him and, for most of the morning, they rode in silence and suffered from their hangovers. When the noon halt was made, they drank more coffee and ate a little food. And recovered somewhat. But as they felt better physically, they became more worried. They began to cast furtive glances at Hatfield.

He gave them no chance to get behind him.

In the saddle again, they shortly saw the red butte looming ahead. And after perhaps a half-dozen miles, they reached its base. They circled its end, located the arroyo and rode into it. It was a broad gully, and the sandy bottom showed hoof tracks. It was a trail used by many riders, and Hatfield knew that he no longer needed Juan and Miguel. He was about to call to them, to tell them so, when Miguel suddenly halted, got down, and began to fuss with the spare animal's pack.

"What's wrong, hombre?" Hatfield demanded.

"The pack," said Miguel. "It is slipping."

The pack was not slipping, Hatfield saw. And he sensed that they had made up their minds that now was the time to carry out Robusto's orders. He glanced at Juan, who had swung his horse about, and Juan's gun was in his hand.

As the Lone Wolf put Goldie into a quick wheeling, Juan's slug missed him by a narrow margin. The man swore in a frightened way, and aimed for another shot. But Hatfield had one of his Colts out, and it roared before Juan could fire a second time. There was a wild scream from Juan as the Ranger's slug tore through his right arm. He reeled in his saddle, and his horse began to buck.

Hatfield swung his gun toward Miguel, for Miguel now was drawing. Again the Lone Wolf's gun crashed, and Miguel's shot, as he took a slug in the arm, went into the ground.

Both vaqueros lost their weapons, and Miguel fell to his knees while Juan, bucked from his spooked horse, lay sprawled on the ground. They moaned, more frightened than in pain.

The Lone Wolf's voice lashed at them.

"Get on your broncs!" he ordered. "Head back to Muleshoe, and let Ben Tyson patch you up. Then head for the X Bar X Ranch and tell Robusto I'll be back to deal with him some day!"

They picked themselves up and with some trouble, due to their wounds, mounted their horses. He told them to leave the pack horse, and to ride out fast. They obeyed willingly enough, fearful that he would change his mind and kill them.

He watched them until they were lost to sight around the base of the arroyo, then holstered his gun and caught up the pack-horse's halter rope. Starting on, he saw that he was not alone. A half-dozen riders had reined in abreast and blocked the gully a hundred yards beyond. They had come around a bend in the arroyo, and had been hidden until now by its banks.

Six hard-visaged men.

After a moment of staring at him, they came on at a walk. They did not draw their guns, but still Jim Hatfield felt uneasiness. He had never seen such a piratical-looking bunch of men.

They reined in again, facing him.

One said, "We were just in time to see your expert display of marksmanship, sir. I compliment you upon it. However, my own rule is to shoot to kill. You are, I assume, Tall Tom Dolan."

A fancy talker, but it was he who gave the group the piratical touch. He had a short red beard and wore a black patch over his left eye, while across his right cheek was a long jagged scar.

"Permit me to introduce myself, sir. I am Major Bucky Shayne."

"I've heard of you," said Hatfield.

"Most people have. I say that modestly, Dolan."

"My name is Smith, Major. Just plain Smith."

SHAYNE chuckled. "You don't need to be coy with us, Tall Tom. We heard you were on your way, and we're glad to welcome you to the Big Bend, which by the way, is something of an outlaw's paradise." He suddenly sobered, and his single eye bored at Hatfield. "Who were your partners, and why did they try to kill you, Dolan?"

Hatfield shrugged. "A couple of X Bar X riders," he said. "I happened by that place and was offered a job by the lady who owns it. I didn't want the job, and her man, Robusto O'Reilly, didn't want me around the place. So he offered to have his two men guide me to your hide-out. But he'd given them orders to kill me." He grinned at Shayne. "Because the lady seemed to take a fancy to me."

"A charming lady," Shayne said. "Robusto is to be envied." His eye winked slyly. "But of course Robusto won't be so fortunate when I get around to taking his place at the X Bar X Ranch—or the Double Cross Ranch, as some call it. You have a good reputation, Dolan. And because of it, I'm glad to have you join my little group."

"Better go easy, Bucky," one of the others said. "You can't be sure he's Tall Tom Dolan. Me, I've seen this hombre somewhere. If I could remember where it was—"

Hatfield felt quick alarm. He did not know the speaker, a swarthy, dour-faced man, but it was possible that the man had seen him somewhere, as a Texas Ranger, and would remember that. If memory told him that here was not the outlaw Dolan but a lawman, Jim Hatfield's life wouldn't be worth a plugged peso.

But Bucky Shayne said cheerfully, "You're a scary old maid, Dutch. You've been everywhere, haven't you? You could have seen Dolan up in the Hole-in-the-Wall country." He looked back at Hatfield. "Come along sir. We'll show you a hide-out that's better than Hole-in-the-Wall!"

Hatfield could only obey. Even if he wanted to do otherwise, he could not have ridden in any direction than toward the outlaw hide-out. He was carrying out his mission, and in a shorter period of time than he had expected. Major Bucky Shayne, soldier of fortune turned bandit, was an unsuspicious sort.

But the man called Dutch was something else again.

Hatfield rode alongside Shayne, and the others fell in behind them. Dutch rode just behind the Lone Wolf, and his murky gaze clung to the big man posing as Tall Tom Dolan. Hatfield was aware of it, and mentally squirmed.

He knew that Dutch was probing his memory, probing deep into it.

And sooner or later, it would respond. Then there would be hell to pay!

CHAPTER V

The Roost

SHAYNE'S outlaw roost was several miles back through a narrow high-walled canyon. Entrance to the canyon was by a narrow cut in some cliffs, and the cut was hidden by rocks and brush. Jim Hatfield knew now why the Rangers had never rounded up Shayne and his bunch. With word reaching Bucky Shayne that lawmen were in the Bend, he would have his men withdraw into the canyon after, almost certainly, taking the precaution of obliterating all tracks outside the entrance. Hoof tracks in the loose ground could be wiped away by using pieces of brush for brooms. And riders not familiar with the immediate country would certainly pass the cut in the cliffs without spotting it.

Hatfield had heard much about the more notorious Hole-in-the-Wall that was a hide-out for the outlaws of Wyoming and Montana, and he imagined that this canyon—Major Bucky Shayne called it simply "The Roost"—was no less formidable a hiding place.

For the first couple of miles, the canyon floor was dense with boulders and brush. Then there was a widened portion with grass for horses, and a small clear-water stream. Here a dozen or more crude buildings stood, some mere picket houses with brush roofs, and others of adobe. The latter were of fair-size. Numerous men, all as tough-looking as Hatfield's escort, loafed about this settlement. Too, as was the case at the Hole-in-the-Wall, there were a few women.

As they reined in before one of the adobes, Shayne pointed to the canyon wall. It was a sloping wall here, and midway up was the mouth of a cave.

"That's where we hold our celebrations," Shayne said, with some pride. "We call the cave the Casino. We've got a bar and gambling lay-outs there. We'll go up later. The fun doesn't start until after dark."

They dismounted and put their horses into a fenced meadow, leaving their saddles on the pole fence. Shayne told Hatfield to bring his bedroll into his dobe. The others who had ridden in with them headed for a larger building that looked like a bunkhouse, the man called Dutch giving the Lone Wolf one last gloomy look.

Shayne's place was a one-room house with a fireplace, a plank table and benches, and a single bunk. He nodded toward a corner and told Hatfield to dump his bedroll there. A bottle and a couple of tin cups stood on the table, and Shayne poured each of them a drink.

Lifting his cup, he said, "Here's to our hitting it off, Dolan." He grinned through his red beard. "We'll get on if you remember that I'm head man here."

Hatfield grinned back. "Don't worry that I'll try to step in your boots, Major."

Shayne seemed pleased that the man he thought was Tall Tom Dolan used his title. They drank the toast, then Shayne offered Hatfield a cigar. He lighted it for himself when Hatfield said that he would stick to his makings. They sat down beside the table, the Lone Wolf rolling a cigarette.

Shayne said, "Maybe you're wondering why I've given you a royal welcome, Tom boy. It's because I need a good man for a lieutenant. I've got nearly fifty men in my band, but the lot of them are fools. Not a one has any brains. But you've ridden with Butch Cassidy, and he's one of the best. If you were good enough for him, you're good enough for me. Besides,

you've proved you're smart by the way you got away from the Rangers. I've got big things lined up, and you can help me swing them and keep this bunch in line."

"What are your plans, Major? Or are they secret?"

"I've a raid planned that will make Butch Cassidy and every other outlaw leader green with envy."

"And you're letting me in on it?"

"It'll be a test for you, friend."

"Oh? How do you mean?"

SHAYNE said, "If you can show me I can count on you to relieve me of some of the dirty work of handling a bunch of riff raff, you'll be in my good graces. And you'll get a share of the loot. The details of the raid are all worked out, and all that remains is to grease the palm of a certain hombre south of the Rio Grande. A General Merardo. When I receive word from him, I ante up—and then we'll ride."

"Into Mexico, eh?"

"That's it, Tom."

"Risky, isn't it?"

"Not with Merardo giving us a helping hand," Shayne said. "He'll keep the Federal soldiers and the Rurales busy. We—"

He paused, as a Mexican woman entered the dobe. She was a good-looking woman despite her plumpness. Shayne spoke to her in Spanish, telling her to prepare supper for three instead of two tonight. He patted her as she passed him on her way to the fireplace. She laughed throatily, and Shayne chuckled.

"Conchita may not be the looker that the Forbes woman is," he said, "but I'd bet plenty she's a better cook. I hope you've got an appetite, bucko."

"I have that," Hatfield said. "And I'll get cleaned up before supper." He went out to where he'd left his saddle on the meadow fence.

He had the information Captain McDowell needed—the location of the hideout, the number of Shayne's followers, and knew that a raid into Mexico was being planned. If it were dark, he could ride out and make his way back to Ben Tyson's store and give the storekeeper of many talents the information, to be relayed to McDowell. But it was now only sundown, and he dared not attempt to run out on the hospitable Major Bucky Shayne. He would be missed before he got out of the canyon. He had to face grim reality that it would be more difficult to leave the Roost than it had been to get into it.

He had a razor, soap, a comb, and a spare shirt in his saddlebags. He carried them to a spot where the creek was fringed by brush, stripped and took a quick bath. Then he donned levis and boots, worked a lather onto his bristly face and scraped it clean with his razor. Shaved, he combed his hair. He was reaching for his clean shirt when a voice said;

"So you, Handsome, are Tall Tom Dolan."

A woman's voice.

Hatfield whirled and saw her curled up on a slab of rock no more than fifty feet upstream. He must have looked startled, for she laughed. She was young—in her twenties, Hatfield guessed. She had henna-tinted hair, and her face was powdered and painted like a dancehall girl's. She wore a plain gingham dress of faded green. But on her it wasn't plain. It was cut low at the neck, and the skirt was so short that a great deal of bare leg was revealed. The bodice was form-fitting; in fact, it was so snug that her generous curves were sharply outlined. Hatfield saw so much as he wondered with a part of mind how long she had been there on the rock.

"Are you, Handsome?" she said. "Are you Tall Tom Dolan?"

"That's right. I'm Dolan."

"I hear you're quite a man. You look like quite a man, too."

"Thanks."

"*Por nada*—as the Mexicans say. My name's Rita." She slowly lifted her arms, pushed the heavy waves of hennaed hair up from the nape of her neck, then arched her back, boldly displaying herself. Her movements were sensuous. Her eyes were half-closed now, watching Hatfield. "You

like Rita, Handsome?"

He put on his shirt. "Nice," he said.

"Sure, nice. But do you like?"

"I like."

"We'll be friends, eh, Handsome?"

HE BUCKLED on his guns, put on his stetson, and gathered up his toilet articles.

"Call me Tom," he told her. "Then we won't be enemies."

"All right, Tom. Come here."

Hatfield hesitated. This was an outcast woman, and no doubt she belonged to one of the outlaws. She was trouble. She was trouble no matter how he handled her. If he played up to her, somebody was going to be jealous. If he scorned her, she would almost certainly fly into a fury and make things difficult for him.

She said, "Come here and show Rita you like her."

Hatfield was saved from having to make a decision as to what to do about the girl by the sudden appearance of the dour-faced outlaw, Dutch. The man came through the bushes and halted with his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt. He divided a sour glance between Hatfield and Rita.

"You work fast, Dolan," he said. "Or is she the fast worker?"

Here was trouble again. The Lone Wolf sensed that Dutch had followed him to the creek in the hope that another look would prod his laggard memory. Dutch wanted badly to remember where it had been that he had before seen the man who was now calling himself Tall Tom Dolan.

Hatfield said, "She's your woman?"

"If she was, I'd use a whip on her," Dutch said. "She's Sailor Dunn's woman."

"Mind your own business, Dutch Brucker!" the girl cried. She was no longer trying to look her best, and anger made her ugly. "I'm my own woman, and I'll do as I like—with whoever I like!"

"Yeah. Till Sailor gets back."

"I'll take care of Sailor Dunn!"

"He'll skin you alive if he catches you playing up to this outsider."

Hatfield said, "Forget it. We were just talking. No harm is done."

He walked away from the pair of them, and knew that Dutch Brucker was staring after him.

After supper with Bucky Shayne and the woman named Conchita, Hatfield rolled and lighted a cigarette and went to the doorway of the house. Darkness lay thickly black in the canyon, and the buildings of the outlaw settlement had lamplighted windows like the houses of a law-abiding community. Up the sloping canyon wall, the mouth of the cave was brightly lighted. Men were climbing the slope. Riders came in, both from the north and the south ends of the canyon. They dismounted and headed for the cave, like cowhands coming into a town for an evening at a saloon.

The night was still young. Hatfield wondered if he could make his way from the canyon under cover of darkness, and his departure not be discovered until morning. Then in the shadows of a dobe opposite Shayne's house a match flared. The flame was lifted to a cigarette, and the cigarette was between the humorless lips of Dutch Brucker.

A quiver knifed through the Lone Wolf. Dutch was watching him, and wanted him to know it. Dutch was sure he was not Tall Tom Dolan. Somehow the man had sensed it. There would be no leaving the canyon tonight. This gloomy, suspicious outlaw would make sure that he didn't leave the Roost.

Shayne came to the door and put an arm about Hatfield's shoulders. "Now that Conchita's fed us, let's go up to the Casino," he said. "You haven't lived until you've seen what we've got up there, bucko!"

They set out together, like a couple of close friends.

And a man followed them. Dutch Brucker.

The entrance was about ten feet wide and eight high, and the cavern itself was perhaps sixty feet across and eighty deep. It had the musty smell of all caves, but there was also the odor of liquor fumes

and tobacco smoke and the perfume of women and the sweaty smell of rough men.

The place was brightly lighted by a dozen or more lamps.

Along one side was a plank bar with two men working behind it—a fat Mexican and a ruddy-faced American with pomaded hair. In the center of the cave and to the other side were numerous crude plank tables and benches. At the rear were several other tables covered with green baize, and they, along with a roulette wheel obtained from where only Major Bucky Shayne knew, were the gambling lay-outs.

ABOUT forty men were in the place, and mingling with them were nearly a dozen women. Most of the men were Americans, and the minority Mexicans. Some of the women were mere girls, others middle-aged but trying to hide their years with gaudy dresses and paint and powder. Several were dusky señoritas, and the others fair-skinned gringas. Their voices were shrill, and their laughter too loud.

The bar was lined with men, and most of the tables were occupied. A poker game was under way at one green-covered table, and at another a Mexican was running a monte bank. Two men were rolling dice at a third table. A man who looked like an erstwhile professional gambler was croupier at the roulette lay-out, and it was mostly women who responded to his flat-voiced, "Place your bets!"

A man with a fiddle and another with a banjo added music to the rowdy din in the place, and shortly after Hatfield and Shayne were seated at a table and served with a bottle and glasses by one of the bartenders, a girl in the short red skirt and low-cut white blouse affected by peon women began to dance in time with the music and a pair of castanets in her hands.

It was an abandoned dance, and caught the attention of the crowd. The castanets clicked faster, and the girl's body picked up the tempo until she was swirling dizzily. Her bare brown legs gleamed. She leaped gracefully onto a bench, then atop a table.

Men yelled, clapped their hands. The other women shrieked, squealed.

Above the uproar, Bucky Shayne asked, "How do you like it here, bucko?"

Hatfield merely smiled.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Dutch Brucker watching him from the end of the bar. The dancer finally became still, wilting to a limp sitting position on the table. Men yelled for more, and pitched money to her. Gold and silver coins, bills. A shower of money.

Shayne's woman, Conchita, came and sat down beside the one-eyed bandit chief. Then from over by the roulette wheel, Rita came pushing through the throng of men gathered about the dancer on the table.

The dancer borrowed a man's hat, gathered up the money, and dropped it into the stetson. Then, slowly, sensuously, she rose on the table and began to click her castanets.

Her body began to writhe while her slippered feet remained still.

Rita slipped around behind Hatfield, lay her hands on his shoulders.

"I've been waiting for you Handsome," she said. "And now I've got you."

"Sit down," he said, "and have a drink."

"Sure."

She sat down beside him on the bench, close. She reached for his glass, emptied it.

"Bourbon," she said. "New Orleans bourbon. That's what friends of Bucky Shane rate. The rest of us have to drink rotgut."

Shayne grinned at her. "You get to be Tall Tom's friend, and you'll be drinking bourbon all the time," he said. "But there's just one hitch. Sailor Dunn is due back tonight." He chuckled. "In fact, Sailor is here now."

Rita uttered a little screech of alarm.

Hatfield looked around at the man just entering the cave. And Sailor Dunn's gaze already was on him and Rita, the look in his eyes one of jealous rage.

CHAPTER VI

Woman Scorned

DUNN was a barrel-bodied man. He wore a buckskin jacket, open from the throat to reveal a large tattoo of a sailing ship on his muscle-corded chest. Perhaps he had once been to sea, but Jim Hatfield suspected that the tattoo had earned him his nickname.

Rita's hand gripped Hatfield's arm. "Don't take anything off him!" she said. "Show him who's the better man. Handsome!"

Bucky Shayne's eyes gleamed. "Friend, you're in for a hard time of it," he said. "Sailor is a brawler from away back."

Hatfield said nothing. It was a time when words were meaningless. He could not say he had no designs on the girl. That would merely get him called a liar. He would have to fight. Fight over a woman he didn't want. He smiled wryly.

Sailor Dunn came to the table, and the great strength of him could be seen in his heavy, sloping shoulders. He said nothing at all, but grabbed Rita by the arm and dragged her off the bench. She screamed. Dunn didn't hit her. He simply whipped her away from the bench with his one-handed grip on her arm, and she went hurtling across the cave to fall in a heap by the bar.

Grabbing the bench then, he tried to topple it and Hatfield. But the Lone Wolf moved swiftly, coming to his feet. Dunn flung the empty bench aside, and it crashed into a table with a great splintering of wood.

"Matey," Dunn said, "you sure picked the wrong wench."

Without more ado, he rushed.

He was fast for so heavy a man, and though his blows were clumsy, the power of them was terrific and the Lone Wolf, slugged alongside the face was knocked to his knees. A boot slammed into his chest the next instant, and he went sprawling on the rocky floor of the cave. Dunn let out a yelp of glee, and moved in to stomp him.

Though dazed, the Ranger rolled away and came catlike to his feet. Dunn rushed him again, too eager now, and Hatfield feinted with his right fist, then crossed with his left. The blow caught Sailor Dunn between the eyes, jolting him so that he stopped dead in his tracks.

The attention of the rowdy crowd no longer was on the contortions of the dancing girl on the table. Every eye was on the two big men brawling over a woman. And already men were betting, the odds on Sailor Dunn. There were shouts of encouragement for Dunn.

He was wary now, having been hit and hit hard. He sidestepped behind a table, then gave it a sudden, violent shove toward the Lone Wolf. Hatfield dodged it, braced himself for the man's rush. Dunn came at him, but pulled up short and aimed a kick at Hatfield's groin. The Lone Wolf fell away from the kick, but grabbed Dunn's up-swung foot. And jerked.

Dunn went down on head and shoulders, struck heavily on the rock floor, and his face lost its ruddy color. He lay for a long moment, gasping. Then with a roared oath, he rolled over and heaved erect. He staggered to the table where Bucky Shane still sat, and grabbed up the bourbon bottle. He broke the bottle against the edge of the table, then lunged at Hatfield in an attempt to use the jagged glass as a weapon, aiming the broken bottle at the Ranger's face.

Hatfield ducked aside. Then, with Dunn reeling off-balance due to missing his blow, he battered the man hard about the head. Dunn dropped the bottle, howled, flung his arms up to shield his face. Hatfield aimed his next punch, one with all his weight behind it, to the heart. He felt the impact all to way to the soles of his feet, and Sailor Dunn, going all loose, collapsed to his knees.

"Enough, friend?" Hatfield asked harshly.

"Hell, no!"

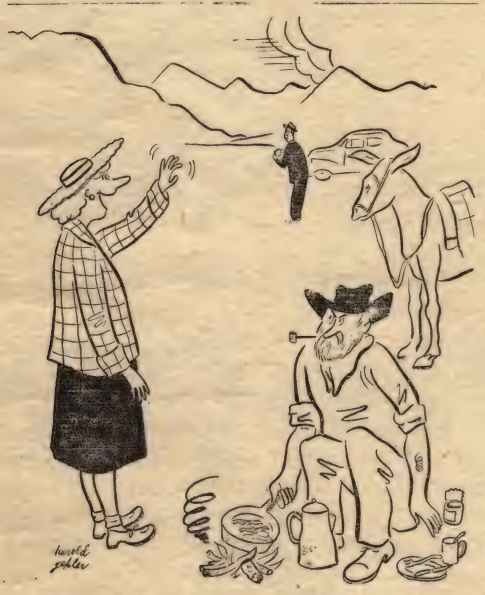
But Dunn was slow in rising, and now

the crowd, disappointed in him, yelled for Hatfield to finish him.

"Boot him, Dolan! Cripple him!"

They were a brutal lot, these outlaws. And a foolish lot. They admired only a winner, feeling no compassion at all for a beaten man. Hatfield himself wanted it over with. He didn't want to batter the man more.

BUT Dunn came to his feet, game as a man could be, muttering, "I've never been whipped. I won't be now!" He



"Henry! Bring the camera! I've found the cutest desert rat!"

came at Hatfield, wobbly on his legs, bleeding from the nose, his great chest heaving. He took a blow to the jaw, shook his head, growled in his throat, but kept coming, trying to get his thick arms about Hatfield's middle.

The Ranger eluded him. Infuriated, Dunn bored in and struck wild, clubbing blows. Hatfield was struck once, twice, a third time. He was driven back until he came up against the bar. Dunn tried to trap him there, again attempted to grapple with him. But Hatfield ducked low, slipped away from the man's awful embrace.

Dunn swore again and came after him. But he left himself wide open, and now the Ranger, heartily sick of it, stood his ground and battered the fellow unmercifully. To end it, he had to punish Sailor Dunn. The man was wobbly again. Hatfield easily parried his slow punches, and at last floored him again with a blow to the heart and another to the chin as the man's knees buckled.

This time Dunn, though not out, was unable to rise. He sat slumped against the bar, his head lolling.

Men crowded around Hatfield, slapping him on the back.

He looked for Rita, and told her, "Come here." When she came to him, her eyes shining with excitement, he said, "He's your man. Take care of him."

"Why, you—"

"Don't be a little fool," Hatfield said. "I didn't try to take you away from him, and I'm not taking you now. He's got a claim on you and—"

Bucky Shayne appeared beside him, and said, "To the victors belong the spoils, friend. Pick up your winnings."

The cave was silent now, and everybody was staring at Hatfield as though they didn't know what to make of him. But Sailor Dunn, picking himself up and holding to the bar for support, grinned broadly.

"Now here's a real shipmate," he said, his voice shaky and yet hearty. "Matey, I always figured I'd hate the guts of the man who finally licked me. But you're a man after my own heart!"

He thrust out his hand, and Hatfield, smiling thinly, gripped it.

He'd made a friend, it seemed. But Rita was regarding him with bitter eyes, and Dutch Brucker was still staring at him moodily. Bucky Shayne, his arm about Conchita's waist, shook his head disapprovingly.

"There's a soft streak in you, friend," he said. "And that's no good."

He seemed disappointed in Tall Tom Dolan.

With Conchita an occupant of Shayne's adobe house, Hatfield had an excuse to move his bedroll outside. He suggested it

when they left the cave, some time later. By that time Bucky Shayne was a little drunk, and he leaned heavily upon Conchita as they descended the slope.

"Have it your way," he said to Hatfield. "But you won't be crowding us."

Once they reached the house, Hatfield got his bedroll and said goodnight. Shayne merely grunted, either because he was displeased with the man he had believed to be Tall Tom Dolan or because he was already too occupied with his woman.

Hatfield bedded down near the creek, and lay in his blankets pondering his chances of getting Goldie from the meadow and riding out. Shortly he heard someone prowling nearby in the darkness and guessed it was Dutch Brucker. And again he knew that tonight was not the time for him to leave the Roost. He would have to wait until Brucker got tired of watching him. . . .

For Bucky Shayne and his outlaw bunch, life at the Roost was one long picnic. There was no work to do, though many of the men at times rode out somewhere on secret errands. There was plenty of food, plenty of whisky, and enough women for companionship. These men wanted nothing more, except, of course, the excitement of an occasional "job." There was much money in the camp, loot from nefarious activities, and it kept circulating through gambling. For Jim Hatfield, it was a boring sort of existence.

He found no opportunity to leave, for Brucker still watched him and Shayne demanded his company. Shayne was a great talker, and over and over he related his adventures as a soldier of fortune in a half-dozen Latin-American countries. The man was restless much of the time, for he expected to hear from General Merardo and no message came. Rita went about with Sailor Dunn, and when she saw Hatfield her eyes flashed with hatred. Sailor Dunn, though, was friendly.

ON THE third day Hatfield had been loafing about the hide-out a message came from General Merardo. Three riders came from Mexico. Swarthy men, each with a *bandido* mustache. They wore big sombreros and had gaily colored serapes over their shoulders and bandoliers of cartridges across their chests.

They met with Major Bucky Shayne in his house.

The meeting lasted for more than an hour, and when it was over the three Mexicans rode away while Shayne shouted from his doorway to gather his men. When they were assembled, Shayne's red-bearded face wore a grin.

"It won't be long now, friends," he told them. "I've had word from General Merardo that he'll soon be ready to start a campaign in Coahuila. He's going to take over the government and make himself governor. That will keep the Federal troops and the Rurales busy—and leave us a free hand in Chihuahua. And we'll gather *mucho* loot!"

There were cheers from the outlaws.

Shayne continued, "But first we've got a job of work. We've got to ante up to Merardo. He needs rifles, ammunition, horseshoes, provisions. The stuff is waiting at the X Bar X Ranch, and we'll have to get it and bring it here by pack-mule. Now I know you buckoes aren't anxious to work, so—"

There was loud laughter.

"So I'm asking for volunteers," Shayne said.

Eager as they were to go raiding into Mexico, the outlaws weren't anxious to work as packers. There was a lot of bantering as they argued among themselves as to who should volunteer.

Hatfield said, "Count me in, Major," and the gloomy Dutch Brucker echoed, "Me, too." Then Sailor Dunn yelled, "If Tall Tom's not afraid of work, I'm not either. I'm with you, Bucky!"

That touched it off, and shortly Shayne had a dozen men to accompany him. He ordered them to get their horses, saying they would start out at once.

Excitement gripped Hatfield as he went to the meadow for Goldie. The trail to the X Bar X Ranch led past Ben Tyson's store at Muleshoe, and he might be able

to give a message to the man. The others had to go into the meadow with lariats to catch their mounts, but Hatfield whistled for the well-trained Goldie and the golden sorrel came prancing up to the gate.

Hatfield led the big horse away from the gate to saddle it, and then, keeping Goldie between him and the other men, he took a piece of paper and a stubby pencil from his pocket. Using his saddle to write upon, he quickly scrawled the information he wanted Ben Tyson to relay to Captain McDowell. He probably wouldn't get a chance to talk alone with Tyson, but he might be able to slip a note to him. He folded the paper and pocketed it He thought he was unobserved until he turned and saw Rita watching him.

"What are you up to, Dolan?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"Writing something. I saw you."

"It wasn't anything."

"Yeah?" She came and stood before him. "Let me see that paper."

Hatfield forced a chuckle. "You're still sore at me," he said, hoping that by changing the subject he could get her mind off what she had seen. But he saw suspicion lingering in his eyes, and knew she wouldn't forget that he'd been doing something odd for an outlaw. Rita was still trouble.

"Show me it was nothing," she said. "Or I'll start yelling."

He was dealing with a woman of no morals, and suddenly he knew that he must treat her as such, even though it was contrary to his nature. She had him in a tight. If she called to the men and they forcibly took the note and read it, his life would be forfeit. Somehow he had to get around this woman he had scorned.

He laughed again, reached out, caught her by the arms. "Sure, I made a mistake when I let Sailor keep you," he told her. "I know that now." He felt her quiver. Her mouth remained sullen, but her eyes softened. He went on, "It'll be different when I get back. You and I—"

"Don't lie to me, Dolan!"

"Well, if you've changed your mind about me, all right."

SHE said fiercely, "I didn't say that. I'm fool enough to still want you. I can't get you out of my mind." She gazed steadily into his eyes. "I've a notion that I've got the whiphand now, my friend. Either you keep your promise when you get back or I'll tell Bucky Shayne what I saw you doing." She lifted her hands, took his face between them then, standing on tiptoe, she pressed her mouth to his in a long, hard kiss. "Now!" she told him. "That's how it's going to be. I'll crack the whip and you'll jump!"

"That won't be hard to do."

"But I sure don't know why I want you after you turned me down."

"I told you I was sorry, Rita," he said.

She stepped back, saying, "Yes, you told me. You said it was a mistake. You'll be going by way of Tyson's Place. Bring me a present from there. You hear?"

He nodded. "Something nice," he said, and drew a relieved breath when Bucky Shayne called to him.

There were thirteen of them, and some one of them—one of the more superstitious—commented on it. "It's unlucky," the man said uneasily. "Thirteen riders. I don't like it."

Bucky Shayne laughed. He and Hatfield were riding together, with Dutch Brucker riding just behind them and the others following by pairs. Shayne was in a rare good humor, now that he was taking the first step toward carrying out his plan to raid down in Mexico.

"A man makes his own luck," Shayne said.

Jim Hatfield felt a sudden revulsion. The prospect of loot was only a part of the man's eagerness. Shayne was truly an adventurer, a soldier of fortune. He wanted to ride at the head of an armed band; he wanted to pillage and kill and worse, and no doubt he would be disappointed if the raid were carried out without bloodshed. Major Bucky Shayne was a scoundrel, and Hatfield knew that the

outlaw leader must be destroyed as though he were a mad dog.

The note must get into Ben Tyson's hands, and the sooner the better. If Captain McDowell received the information in time and got Rangers to the Roost before Shayne and his band headed for south of the Rio Grande, it would mean the saving of the lives of many Mexican villagers and *rancheros*. If there was some hitch in McDowell's plans and the raid wasn't carried out it might mean, too, that the Rurales would carry out their threat to cross into the Big Bend and have a try at wiping out the Shayne crowd.

Hatfield had no doubts about the Rurales trying such a bold scheme. Nor did he question their ability to find the outlaw hide-out, since he knew how Rurales operated. They would simply enter the Bend and pick up whatever men they encountered until they found one who could lead them to the Roost. And the very men who would refuse to talk to the Texas Rangers would talk plenty to the Rurales—and speak the truth. They had ways of loosening togues. So to save lives and to forestall the Rurales, Hatfield needed to get his note into Ben Tyson's hands. As soon as possible!

It was nearly sundown when the band reached Muleshoe. Tyson's Place was like an oasis for them, and once they sighted the grubby little settlement, they lifted their mounts to a hard run. They dropped from their saddles and crowded through the saloon doorway with a lot of rough horseplay, except for Bucky Shayne who held his pace to Hatfield's.

"See what I mean?" he said. "A bunch of ignoramuses. They go loco over the chance at a few drinks. They need to learn discipline, and you and I will teach it to them when we cross the Rio Grande!"

Hatfield noticed as he dismounted that two horses in the X Bar X iron stood at the hitch-rack in front of the store entrance. One was a dun, and the other, a fine sorrel, was rigged with a side-saddle. Knowing that the sorrel had been ridden there by Lanya Forbes, he felt a sudden excitement. In spite of himself, he was as much under the woman's spell as so many other men.

A Mexican was on duty behind the bar, and he'd served several customers before the arrival of the outlaws. One of these was Robusto O'Reilly. Hatfield glanced through the wide doorway connecting the barroom and store. Lanya Forbes was at the counter and being waited on by Ben Tyson. The woman was wearing a dark brown riding habit such as was fashionable in the East.

SHAYNE spoke to Robusto in low tones, no doubt telling him that they were on their way to the X Bar X Ranch to get the stored supplies. Robusto nodded, finished his drink, then turned toward the doorway to the adjoining room.

But Shayne said, "Hold on, friend. One of my boys has a crow to pick with you."

Robusto faced about, a wary look in his blue eyes. His handsome face stiffened at sight of Jim Hatfield. The wary look was replaced by one of guilt.

Shayne's single eye gleamed. "Yeah—Dolan," he said. "You gave him a couple of guides to take him to the Roost, but you gave them orders to kill him along the way." He glanced at Hatfield. "What are you going to do about it, bucko?"

Hatfield had taken out makings. He spilled tobacco into a paper. He said, "That's between Robusto and me. A private affair. I'll take care of him in my own good time."

"There's no better time than now," Shayne said. "You're fast with a gun, and this Mexican Irishman is supposed to be fast with his. My money's on you, Tall Tom. I'll tell you what, friends. I'll count to three, then the pair of you grab for your shooting-irons. And may the best man win."

Hatfield rolled and lighted his cigarette, then said, "Major, do your own killings. I don't know why you want Robusto dead, but—"

Shayne cut in, "Maybe it's because I want to take his place with the widow."

Robusto's face was still stiff, and now glistened with sweat.

Hatfield dragged hard on his cigarette. "We'll settle it later, eh, Robusto? When we're alone. You agreeable?"

Robusto managed a wavering grin. "*Si* —Later."

He turned and went into the store.

Shayne laughed, then faced the bar and demanded a bottle of the bartender. He drank the whisky directly from it, and it was a long drink. He set down the bottle, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then said, "Now I feel like having a little sport with the Desert Witch."

Hatfield followed him into the merchandise-cluttered room. Lanya was paying Tyson for her purchases, and they were in a flour-sack that Robusto lifted from the counter. Shayne went straight to the woman and put his arm about her waist. Lanya whirled, slapped him hard across his scarred cheek. It was no playful slap, but a real blow that was loud in the room and rocked Shayne's head.

"I warn you, Shayne," she said icily, "don't ever touch me again!"

The man's face was ugly. "What'll you do? Have Robusto gun me down?"

"Just that."

Shayne forced a laugh. "Go ahead, Robusto," he said. "Gun me down, for I'm sure going to touch your woman again."

There was a trapped look in Robusto's eyes, for now two of Shayne's men—Dutch Brucker and Sailor Dunn—stood in the doorway with their hands on their guns. Jim Hatfield saw the pattern. Shayne did want the woman, and he thought that he might have her if Robusto could be done away with, and he wanted the man killed.

But if Robusto was frozen by fear, Ben Tyson was not. He pulled a shotgun from beneath the counter and leveled it at Shayne.

"Don't," he said. "Don't touch her, Shayne!"

Shayne stared at him. "Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed. "Here's another poor fool with an eye on the widow! A pipsqueak like you, Tyson!" He was silent a moment, eying the merchant's shotgun and the determined look in the man's eyes. Then he drawled, "Dutch, can you plug him before he fills me with buckshot?"

"I've got him beaded," Brucker said. "My gun's cocked."

Hatfield noticed two things. Shayne was edging toward the woman, intending to grab her as a shield, and Tyson, not as easily cowed as Robusto, was aware of what Shayne was up to and would shoot him down in spite of Dutch Brucker's cocked gun. Tyson was as close to death as a man could be, and dead he would be of no use to the Rangers. Because of the woman, Hatfield saw his mission jeopardized.

He said, "That's enough of this fool play!"

He stopped forward, pulled Lanya away from Shayne.

The outlaw chief scowled at him. "What's the idea, Dolan?" he demanded. "Have you got ideas about her, too?"

"I don't like to see men killed because of her," Hatfield said harshly. "You among them."

THAT wasn't wholly the truth. He cared only about saving Ben Tyson. Shayne's death would be another matter. It would serve the best interests of law and order. But Hatfield had to stay in the man's good graces, at least for a while longer.

"Tyson's not fooling, Major," he warned. "He'll kill you, sure."

Shayne thought it over, then muttered, "Yeah, I guess you're right."

He stalked from the store, back to the barroom.

Lanya drew away from Hatfield's grip. She was pale, and breathing hard. She looked at Ben Tyson who, now that the danger was passed, was badly shaken.

"It was a foolish thing to do, Ben," she said. "But I appreciate your defending me." She glanced at Hatfield, and said, less warmly, "I'm grateful to you too, Dolan. It's odd that you and Ben had the courage to take my part, when the man

I pay to guard me lost his nerve." She turned away.

Robusto flushed darkly, then followed her from the store in silence.

Dutch Brucker was alone in the doorway now, his dark gaze on Hatfield. Tyson put away his shotgun, then deposited in the till the money he'd received from Lanya. It was now or never, the Lone Wolf decided. He moved toward the counter, saying, "Give me a sack of makings, friend." Then, as Tyson went to the case where he kept his tobacco, Hatfield turned his back toward Dutch Brucker and reached in his pocket for some money.

He brought out the note with a handful of coins and, hoping that Brucker wouldn't notice, lay the folded paper and a half-dollar on the counter. Showing nothing at all, Tyson picked up the note and the coin. He got Hatfield's change from the till, at the same time furtively letting the note drop to the floor behind the counter, to be recovered later.

Hatfield turned with his tobacco sack and papers, and realized that Brucker had noticed nothing out of the way. The outlaw turned back into the barroom behind the Ranger.

Shayne was at the bar, drinking from his bottle again. The other outlaws were lined up, keeping the bartender busy. Hatfield felt uneasy as he joined Shayne, thinking that the man would make an issue of what had happened in the other room. But Shayne seemed to have forgotten it already.

"We'll let the boys have another round, Tom," he said, "then we'll get some grub and clear out of here."

Later, buying some provisions, he seemed to hold no grudge against Ben Tyson, although he did ridicule the merchant for, as he said, "Playing the hero for the Forbes woman." Tyson was wise enough to take the ribbing with a smile.

They got the men out of the place finally, and bivouacked by the nearby creek to eat. After the cold meal, they mounted and rode on, with Shayne setting a fast pace. There was no loafing along the trail as the two vaqueros had done when taking Hatfield south. When on the move, Bucky Shayne was a man in a hurry.

They did not overtake Lanya Forbes and Robusto O'Reilly on the way, so Hatfield knew that they, too, were traveling fast. He pondered the problem of the woman as he rode with the outlaws, wondering if he was supposed to arrest her as an accomplice of Shayne's. She was certainly involved with the outlaw crowd, even if only in an indirect way. She obtained the supplies for them, the supplies that went to the Mexican bandit, Merardo, as payment for the privilege of raiding in Mexico which Merardo had granted Shayne. Yes, she was involved and no doubt she would eventually be taken into custody. And it might fall to Jim Hatfield's lot to place her under arrest. He would not relish the duty.

Darkness came, and the band continued to ride steadily toward the X Bar X Ranch. But then, close to midnight, Shayne swung off the road toward Carter Styles' ranch, telling Hatfield he had business there.

Once they arrived at Styles's headquarters, Shayne said, "Get some sleep, boys. We won't move on until morning."

He told Dutch Brucker to take care of his horse, and crossed to the ranch house where Styles was waiting in the doorway. The two of them went inside, closed the door.

HATFIELD was puzzled, wondering what business the bandit could have with a townsman turned back-country rancher. He off-saddled Goldie, then spread his bedroll. He rolled and lighted a cigarette, lay there smoking while the others bedded down. Sailor Dunn spread his blankets close to where Hatfield lay. Dunn had been friendly toward him ever since Hatfield had refused to take up with Rita. Now Hatfield decided to trade on that friendliness.

He said, "Sailor, what's this Carter Styles?" He kept his voice low.

"The brains behind this outfit," Dunn said. "He gets a cut out of every job we pull. The loot is always divided in

half—half for Shayne and Styles and half for the rest of us."

"I don't get it. Why does Shayne need Style's brains?"

"Styles sets up the jobs," Dunn said. "He made the first deal with Merardo, too. And he contracts for the supplies Shayne delivers to that *bandido*. To keep himself in the clear, he has the stuff freighted to the X BAR X Ranch. Robusto takes them over there. If the law should find out that guns are being run across the Rio Grande, Styles will be in the clear, because of the way he works it. He's smart all right. He once had us raid a bank over in New Mexico and—"

"How does the Forbes woman fit into it?"

"Styles has a hold on her."

"What kind of a hold, Sailor?"

"Well, Styles used to be a tinhorn gambler back in San Antone and elsewhere," Dunn said. "And her husband was a big gambler—and a big loser. Styles held a lot of Sam Forbes's IOUs when the Rangers killed him. He's making the widow buy 'em back by letting the supplies be delivered to her ranch."

Hatfield merely grunted in reply to that, then lay thoughtful again. So Lanya was involved in this ugly business only because she believed she should pay off her dead husband's gambling debts. But still she was guilty of aiding and abetting the outlaws, and the Lone Wolf couldn't justify her actions. As for Carter Styles, he also would have to be caught up when the Ranger net closed on the Shayne crowd.

CHAPTER VII

Dutch Remembers Too Much

BUCKY SHAYNE completed his business with Carter Styles during the night, for he roused his men in the gray dawn. They crawled grumblingly from their blankets to saddle their horses. They rode out without breakfast, Shayne telling them that they would let the Widow Forbes feed them. They reached X Bar X headquarters as the sun rose over the mountains to the east, racketing into the ranchyard and, dismounting, headed for the cook shack.

Hatfield noticed that the X Bar X vaqueros were in no hurry to ride out on the range this morning, and it seemed to him that they eyed the outlaws with grave misgivings. But when the Ranger came from the cook shack after breakfast, only old Hernandez Gonzales and three others remained. The four ranch hands kept aloof from Shayne and his men, remaining over by the corrals.

Robusto O'Reilly appeared at the patio gate, a sullen look on his darkly handsome face. He remained in the gateway until Shayne called to him, then he crossed the yard reluctantly.

"Where are the mules, amigo?" Shayne asked.

"Out on the range," Robusto replied. "The vaqueros will bring them in."

"Well, there's no hurry," Shayne told him. "I've decided to loaf around here a couple days."

Robusto's face stiffened. "There is nothing here for you," he said. "Take your supplies and clear out. You are not wanted at the X Bar X."

Shayne laughed. "Let's go look at the stuff, eh, friend?"

Robusto swore in Spanish, but led the way to the barn. He called to Gonzales, telling him to send two vaqueros over to give him a hand. Inside the barn, Robusto put the two X Bar X men to work moving a sizable stack of bagged grain. But the sacks of corn and oats were only a cover for what was stacked behind them—cases of rifles, boxes of ammunition, kegs of horse-shoes, cases of canned food.

Hatfield estimated that the value of the supplies amounted to about five thousand dollars, and that there were two hundred or more rifles stored there. General Merardo would indeed be able to launch a campaign, once the stuff was delivered to him.

Shayne took a paper from his pocket and made a hasty inventory of the stores, checking them against his list which, Hatfield supposed, he had obtained from the secretive Carter Styles. When satisfied with his check, Shayne nodded to Robusto.

"It looks all right," he said. "Now I'll have a talk with the widow."

"Señora Forbes is not yet up," Robusto told him.

"I'll wake her."

"No!"

Shayne's face hardened, and with the black eye-patch and the great scar across the right cheek it looked satanic. "Friend, I grow weary of you," he said. "If you're so stupid that you don't know that I'm boss here so long as I stay, you know it now. And the woman is going to know it, too!"

He turned to leave the barn.

Robusto muttered another oath, then bent and grabbed the long-bladed knife from his boot. He was about to throw himself upon the back of the unsuspecting Shayne, no doubt to slit his throat, when Hatfield grabbed him.

"Wait!" the Lone Wolf whispered. "The time's not ripe yet!"

He held the man in a viselike grip and Shayne, still unaware of his danger, left the barn. When Robusto finally got control of himself, he looked questioningly at Hatfield.

"You mean. . .?"

"I'm with you. We won't let him force himself on the señora."

"You speak the truth, hombre?"

"You'll have to take my word," Hatfield told him. "I'll side you if he tries anything. But don't go off half-cocked and kill now, for the others will only kill you." He was silent a moment, studying the man. He came to the conclusion that if Robusto O'Reilly had any virtue, is was that he was loyal to Lanya Forbes. He added, "Tell old Hernandez to call in the vaqueros and have them stand by in case we have some trouble. You savvy?"

Robusto nodded jerkily.

ONE of the X Bar X vaqueros came into the ranchyard at a gallop as they stepped from the barn. He jerked his mount to a sliding halt, dropped from saddle, ran to Hernandez Gonzales, spouting excited Spanish.

Shayne had halted midway across the yard to stare at him. The other outlaws, loafing in the shade of the cookshack and the bunkhouse, also watched. Robusto headed for the vaquero and Gonzales.

"What's wrong?" he called.

Gonzales shrugged. "It is only that a lawman is riding this way," he said.

It was as though a bombshell had exploded. A stunned silence blanketed the men about the ranchyard. Then Shayne muttered an obscene oath, and demanded, "What is this lawman—a Ranger scouting the trail for others following him?"

Gonzales shook his head. "Diego says that there's nobody behind him. The man is Sheriff Ward, from Charco Wells."

Shayne turned his one-eyed gaze on the man posing as Tall Tom Dolan. "He's on your trail," he said accusingly. "You were the last man to ride down this way. Ward's a damned bloodhound on a trail. If he should slip up on this place and see us here, then get back to report to the Rangers—" He swore again. "It's up to you to take care of him, Dolan!"

Hatfield nodded. "I guess you're right, Major."

"And don't let that soft streak of yours get the best of you," Shayne said. "Remember, only dead men tell no tales."

"I'll take care of him."

"Yeah, and I'll go along to see that you do!" Dutch Brucker spoke up, his dark gaze on the Lone Wolf. "Any objections, Dolan?"

Hatfield stared back at him. He knew it would appear suspicious to all of them if he turned down Brucker's offer. He knew, too, that the man would either ride with him or follow him, and it might work out better if they rode together.

He said, "No objections, Dutch."

"I'll ride along, too," Sailor Dunn put in.

Anger gripped Jim Hatfield, but he

choked it back. "Glad to have you, Sailor," he said, and went to mount Goldie.

They rode with him, the suspicious Dutch Brucker and the friendly Sailor Dunn. They expected him to bushwhack the lawman, and he must find a way of deceiving them into thinking he would do the job — to keep them from doing it. He realized that he might be able to get the drop on them, disarm them, place them under arrest, then, after a talk with the sheriff, turn them over to him. Or he could take them out of the Big Bend himself.

But neither plan suited him. If he turned them over to Sheriff Ward, he would be hard put to explain it when he returned to the X Bar X Ranch without them. Shayne and the other outlaws would guess what he'd done. As for his taking them to jail— Well, Captain McDowell's orders had said nothing about his quitting the outlaw band once he'd joined it. Evidently, his chief wanted him to stay in the Big Bend until the gang was rounded up. Also, there was Lanya Forbes to consider. He had promised Robusto O'Reilly that he would help protect her from Bucky Shayne.

It was a tricky situation, and Hatfield felt caught in a trap.

They rode through the V-shaped notch in the hills, then through the rough country to the north. Topping a rocky ridge, they saw a tiny moving speck far out along the trace. They reined in, watching, knowing a rider was coming along at a walk.

Brucker spat, and said, "Well, there's your man, Dolan. An easy mark."

Hatfield was surveying the vast stretch of rock and brush. He said, "You two wait here. I'll circle around and get behind him. That way, if he should get me, you can get him."

"I'll go with you," Brucker said, "Sailor can stay here."

Sailor Dunn said, "You stay with me, like Tom says. That badge-toter is his meat, and Tall Tom is the man to take care of him. You're staying here, Dutch."

Hatfield swung Goldie away from them, quartering down the ridge and avoiding the road. When he looked back, Dunn and Brucker had vanished among some boulders overlooking the road.

THE LONE WOLF breathed easier and the success of his hastily formed plan now depended upon the oncoming lawman. He aimed toward a cluster of rocks that would hide him from both the sheriff and the two men on the ridge. Leaving Goldie in some brush, well back from the rocks, he went on afoot. He drew one of his Colts as he concealed himself among the great boulders. And shortly he heard the *clop-clopping* of hoofs.

Peering from his hiding place, he saw that Sheriff Ward was one of those peace officers grown old in the service of law and order. A genuine manhunter, a hater of men like Tall Tom Dolan. A man without fear.

Hatfield stepped out behind him, and said, "Put your hands on your saddlehorn, Sheriff, and listen to me! It means you life!"

A less experienced man might have grabbed for his gun and wheeled his horse about. But Ward, after a start, reined in and put his hands on his pommel.

The Ranger said, "There are two outlaws hiding on that ridge yonder, waiting to gun you down, Ward. I'm Jim Hatfield of the Texas Rangers and—"

"The Lone Wolf!"

"Yeah — and I'm pretending to be Tall Tom Dolan, on orders," Hatfield said tersely. "You're spoiling my game, friend. I was sent out by the outlaw crowd to kill you. I'm going to fire a shot, so you drop like your dying. Savvy?"

"A little."

"Lay still for a half-hour, then head back to Charco Wells," Hatfield said.

And he fired a shot.

The sheriff's horse spooked, began to buck, and when Ward dropped from its back, he went down hard. He sprawled out, lay motionless. Hatfield stepped close, fired a shot into the ground. He knelt and rolled Ward over onto his back.

"I'm taking your badge, Sheriff, as evi-

dence that you're a dead man."

"Hatfield, I feel like a darned fool."

"Better that than a dead man, as you would be now if I was Tall Tom Dolan."

Hatfield unpinned the badge, rose and went to get Goldie. As he rode toward the ridge, he saw Brucker and Dunn come from the rocks there and head his way. He lifted Goldie to a lope to head them off, he met them at the bottom of the slope. He reined in facing them and showed them the badge.

"A present for Bucky Shayne, boys," he said.

Then he chilled, for Dutch Brucker was staring at him with a startled look of recognition. The outlaw said, "Now I know where I saw you before, hombre. It was at San Antone and—"

He broke off, grabbed for his gun.

Hatfield drew, too, but Sailor Dunn's gun crashed simultaneously with Brucker's. There was a scream from Brucker, then he went all loose and pitched from his horse. His shot had missed Hatfield by a narrow margin, and now he was dead because he'd probed too hard into his memory. Sailor Dunn looked shaken.

"The crazy galoot!" Dunn exclaimed. "Why'd he try to kill you, Tom?"

Hatfield shook his head.

Dunn said worriedly, "This'll make trouble for me. Brucker had a lot of friends in the bunch. They'll fix me for killing him!"

"No need to tell them that you killed him," Hatfield said. "They'll believe it if we claim the sheriff put up a fight and Brucker got killed in it."

Sailor Dunn was greatly relieved. And when Hatfield thanked him for saving his life, he looked pleased. They dismounted, lifted Brucker's body, and placed it across the saddle of his horse, tying it in place with his lariat. Dunn asked what they should do about the sheriff's body.

Hatfield said, Dolan-fashion, "Leave it for the buzzards."

They rode back toward the X Bar X Ranch, Sailor Dunn leading the horse bearing Dutch Brucker's body.

A COUPLE of Brucker's friends with the group at ranch headquarters were bitter about his death, but accepted the word of Sailor Dunn and "Tall Tom Dolan" that the outlaw had been killed in a gun-fight with the sheriff. They took the body away to bury it.

The X Bar X vaqueros had brought in a band of thirty wild-looking mules and were holding the critters on a flat out behind the barn. The outlaws showed no inclination to rig the mules with pack-saddles, and Bucky Shayne was not in evidence.

Robusto O'Reilly was sitting in the doorway of the bunkhouse, holding his head in his hands, and Hatfield saw that he had been gun-whipped.

"Shayne?" the Lone Wolf asked.

Robusto swore lurid Spanish oaths.

"Where's he now?" Hatfield asked. "In the house?"

"Yes. And his men have orders to shoot me if I go there."

"I'll go in your place," Hatfield said. "Did you tell old Hernandez to have the vaqueros ready for trouble?"

"*Si.* And they are ready."

"Good. But don't let them start anything unless I can't handle Shayne."

Robusto nodded. He was a sick looking man.

Hatfield crossed the yard, and none of the outlaws tried to stop him. He had entered the patio and crossed it to the gallery when he heard angry voices from Lanya Forbes's office. He opened the door, stepped inside. She was holding Shayne at bay with a small revolver held steadily on his middle.

CHAPTER VIII

Kill — or Die Trying!

HATFIELD closed the door, stood with his shoulders to it. He took out makings and shook some tobacco into a paper, smiling at Bucky Shayne.

"The lady doesn't seem romantically inclined, Major," he said. "Or is it that your manly beauty doesn't appeal to her?"

Shayne's scarred, one-eyed face was ugly. "She needs a little taming, that's all," he said savagely. "And damn it, I've made up my mind to stay here until I do the taming!"

"What about getting those supplies to Merardo?"

"They'll keep."

"The General may be annoyed."

Shayne cursed General Merardo. He kept looking at Lanya Forbes, and seemed to be considering what his chances would be if he jumped her.

Hatfield told him. He said, "I'm betting she'll shoot, and she'll hit you, too, Major."

Shayne thought that over, then said, "Yes, it's a possibility." He got his temper under control, and managed a lopsided grin. "Well, I can wait." He moved back a couple steps. "Maybe you'll have better luck with her. That's why you're here, eh? To try your luck?"

Hatfield lighted a match with his thumb nail, held the flame to his cigarette.

"What about that sheriff?" Shayne asked.

"He won't bother us any," Hatfield told him. "But there was shooting, and Dutch Brucker got killed. Some of the boys are digging his grave now."

Shayne was untouched. "Brucker's kind are easy to find," he said, and came to the door.

Hatfield stepped aside.

Shayne opened the door, then looked at Lanya who still had him covered with her revolver. He said, "Dolan, get that gun away from her. That's an order."

He went out, closing the door, without waiting for a reply.

Hatfield went to a window, wanting to make sure that the bandit chief did not eavesdrop at the door. When he saw Shayne leaving the patio, he turned and studied Lanya Forbes. He puffed on his cigarette, saying nothing. She stood backed against her desk, the gun still in her hand but now pointed downward. Her face was pale, and there was a trapped look in her eyes.

Hatfield said, "You don't need to fear me. I'm not going to try to disarm you." His voice was gentler than Tall Tom Dolan's could have been.

She went to pieces then, her shoulders drooping and tears welling in her eyes. She said chokingly, "Why won't he leave me alone? I'm not like men think. Just because I'm a widow and alone, every-

A TALL TEXAS TALE

BIGGER AND BETTER

THE big man stood on the seat of his buckboard and bellowed, "Texas is bigger and better than any place in the world, and anything in it is bigger and better than they got anywheres else!"

A crowd gathered, and they asked him about women and horses and cabbages and kings, and the big man readily admitted that Texas had them all and of a size that could not even be approached elsewhere.

A little man in a stovepipe hat piped up: "The only thing you've convinced me that Texas has that's bigger and better than anything of its kind elsewhere—is liars. So how can I believe any of the other things you've said?"

"Why, that's easy," replied the big one without pause, "if you'll just keep in mind the fact that a Texan never tells lies about anything but the pure truth. Can you deny that, my friend?"

The man in the stovepipe hat looked a bit bewildered and at last had to shake his head sadly, knowing he'd got caught in his own trap.

body thinks that I—well, that I'm a woman of easy virtue. And I'm not, I tell you!"

"I know, Mrs. Forbes."

"But that horrible man—"

"It doesn't matter to him what sort of a woman you are," Hatfield told her. "Good or bad, it doesn't matter — so long as he finds a woman desirable. He's no ordinary outlaw, Lanya. He's not just a cowboy gone wrong. He's an unscrupulous scoundrel, Bucky Shayne is. Now and then you'll come upon men like him. He figures he can have what he wants, and he doesn't care how he gets it. He lives by no rules. You've reason to fear him, I know. But I'll do what I can to protect you. But I'm one against him and ten others. Unless Robusto and the vaqueros side me."

"It's not only Shayne," she said bitterly. "It's everybody. Everybody thinks the worst of me. Is it because I made myself less than respectable by coming into the Big Bend?"

"If you want to know, it's Robusto."

"But he's only my bodyguard, just a hired hand!"

Hatfield nodded. "I believe that," he told her. "But most people only believe what they want to. Robusto is a big, handsome fellow. He's with you all the time. They think he's more to you than just a hired hand. And it could be that Robusto sometimes gives them a little reason to believe it."

"Yes, that must be it," Lanya said. "But when I settled here, I knew that the vaqueros weren't enough to keep me safe. Hernandez Gonzales told me about Robusto. A brave man, a good man with a gun, so Hernandez told me. So I sent for him, gave him the job. He did well until lately. But then Carter Styles settled nearby, and Robusto failed to give me real protection against him."

"And Styles is a partner of Shayne's?"

"Yes."

"You fear Styles too?"

LANYA nodded. "For two reasons," she said huskily. "He holds several thousand dollars worth of IOUs signed by my late husband. I hadn't the cash to buy them, as I felt I should. After all, my husband's signature—" She was silent a moment, a faraway look in her eyes. She must have been remembering her husband. Then she went on, "Styles first insisted upon my taking him in as a part-owner of the X Bar X. I refused and Robusto backed me up. Next Styles came with a proposition. He'd let me earn, as he called it, the IOUs. I was to store goods here that he was having freighted in from some place in Missouri. He'd made a business agreement with a band of men wanted by the Rangers. He knew I hate the Rangers. Robusto backed him on that, and I gave in. I found out too late that a part of each shipment that came to the ranch was guns and ammunition. It was too late for me to try and back out then."

"Did Styles keep his promise?"

"Partly. He's turned over one IOU for a thousand dollars."

"No court would say that you should pay your dead husband's gambling debts."

Lanya gave him a bitter look. "I want nothing to do with the courts," she said. "A Texas court acquitted the Rangers who murdered my husband."

Hatfield said nothing to that, though he was well aware that her husband's death had not been murder. The Rangers had killed him in a gun-battle, in the line of duty. He felt sorry for her, and wished he were free to speak out and reveal that at this very moment plans were being carried out to end Major Bucky Shayne's reign of terror.

She had been tricked into letting the supplies for the *bandido*, Merardo, be delivered and stored at her ranch. She had not been told that guns and ammunition were among the supplies, and she had been helpless when she had discovered it. Hatfield was secretly relieved to know that she was not a willing accomplice of Shayne's.

She said dully, "I don't know where this will all end for me. Robusto has lost his nerve, and the *vaqueros* are too few to fight the outlaws. I don't know if I have

the courage to kill Shayne if he tries to force himself on me again. And I know that Carter Styles is just waiting his chance to take over the X Bar X Ranch. Or if not he, then someone else will try it." She smiled bleakly. "They call me the Desert Witch, but I'm just a frightened woman."

"You should have stayed where the law could protect you."

"The law — Texas Rangers!"

"You could be wrong about them, Lanya."

"That's a strange thing for an outlaw to say, Tom Dolan."

He had almost forgot that he was posing as Dolan. He smiled thinly. "What I meant was, that if you had your ranch outside the wild country and anybody bothered you—me for example—you could appeal to the Rangers and they'd rid you of me in a hurry. Don't you see that?"

"All I can see is that my husband is dead because of them," she said. "And I'm lost and lonely without him."

"There'll be another man for you some day. I'm sure of it."

"No!"

He smiled again, and did not argue the point with her. But she was young still, and incredibly lovely. She was made to love and be loved, and somehow he knew that sooner or later a man—a good man—would come along and win her in spite of her clinging to the memory of Sam Forbes.

He said, "I'll keep an eye on Shayne. And try to keep him away from here."

He opened the door, went out. Crossing the patio, he heard a commotion in the ranchyard. When he reached the patio gate, he saw that Shayne and his outlaws were disarming Robusto O'Reilly and the X Bar X vaqueros.

The outlaw chief was determined to have his way here at the X Bar X Ranch, and was making sure there would be no interference.

There was a despairing look in Robusto's blue eyes, and old Hernandez Gonzales was shaking with helpless rage. The vaqueros were sullen; but, without their guns, they were frightened, too. Bucky Shayne strutted back and forth, making sure that his men didn't miss a single weapon when they disarmed the vaqueros. Sailor Dunn and three other outlaws were taking the guns from the X Bar X men, dumping them into gunnysacks. The rest of the outlaws stood by with their guns drawn and cocked.

SHAYNE finally turned to Robusto, and said, "Here's the deal. Tell Señora Forbes that she's got to deal with me or with Carter Styles. That dude wants this ranch and, by damn, I'll see that he gets it if she doesn't ask me real polite to keep it from him. Now get going!"

Robusto had indeed lost his nerve He walked toward the house like a man in a daze. Shayne turned to Hatfield grinning.

"You take that gun from her, Dolan?"

"No. I didn't get a chance."

"It was an order!"

"And if I'd carried it out," the Lone Wolf said, "I'd probably be a dead man now. I've a hunch that the señora is a crack shot."

"Well, no matter," Shayne said. "I've got another way to deal with her."

He turned away, shouting at the vaqueros to get out of his sight, then went into the bunkhouse. Hatfield followed him, found him drinking from a bottle. As Hatfield had seen him do before, Shayne poured the whisky down his throat as though it were water.

He grinned at Hatfield. "I made a deal last night with Carter Styles," he said. "He figures the X Bar X will some day be the best ranch in the Big Bend, and he wants it. He knew the woman will never call in the Rangers, so he figures it's safe enough for him to take over—through me."

"So you're giving her no real choice, eh?"

"Sure. Between me and Robusto."

"She was never Robusto's woman, Shayne."

"So she told you, maybe?"

"I believe her."

Shayne took another long pull at the

bottle. His eyes looked bleary, and his voice was becoming thick. "I don't believe her," he said. "She's as wild a woman as any we've got at the Roost. She just needs to forget Robusto for a better man — and I'm that better man." He carried the bottle to a bunk, stretched out. "She's got until dark to come to terms, Dolan. And maybe if I like her terms I'll let her keep her ranch — with me as her partner."

Hatfield said nothing. He left the bunkhouse.

The vaqueros who had families were gone to their houses, and the others, with old Hernandez, were gathered in a dejected group over by the corrals. The outlaws had started a poker game at the shady side of the bunkhouse, and those not playing were watching.

Hatfield crossed the yard, entered the patio. Robusto was coming from the gallery. He looked deeper in despair than before. The blood on his left temple had clotted, but Hatfield suspected that the gun-whipping he'd received had left him dazed. The man shook his head.

"She will not talk to me," he said. "She will not let me inside."

"Shayne won't pull anything until tonight," Hatfield said. "Be ready then."

"What can I do without my gun and my knife? And the vaqueros —"

"There are guns in the barn," Hatfield said. "Cases of them. When Shayne and his men are at supper, you and the vaqueros arm yourselves. Tell Hernandez it's the only way. Shayne may want the woman, but there's more to it than that. He's figuring on turning the ranch over to Carter Styles. So you and the crew have got to fight. But don't make your play too soon. Savvy."

"How will we know when the time is right?"

"I'll give you the signal."

Robusto nodded, giving Hatfield a searching look, "But I do not understand why you do this, Señor Dolan."

"You don't need to understand it," Hatfield said. "Now clear out. I don't want any of the Shayne crowd to see us talking."

Robusto nodded, and left the patio.

Hatfield stood there for a long time after the man was gone. He took out makings and mechanically rolled a cigarette, lost in thought. He had no orders to attempt to smash Bucky Shayne. Captain Bill McDowell didn't expect that of him. On the other hand, McDowell would expect him to do what he could to protect Lanya Forbes. So he made his decision.

He would kill Bucky Shayne tonight.

Or die trying!

CHAPTER IX

Battle in the Ranchyard

IT WAS nearly full dark when Shayne roused himself from drunken sleep. He was in an ugly humor, and he shoved one of his men out of his way when he left his bunk. The outlaws had brought their poker game into the bunkhouse when it had begun to grow dark, and their loud talk had awakened their leader. They had gone to the cook shack at sundown, demanded that the X Bar X cook feed them, but none had bothered to wake Shayne so that he could eat. Now he staggered from the bunkhouse and headed for the cook shack.

Jim Hatfield followed him outside, and crossed the yard toward the big adobe house. He had no hope that Shayne was suffering too greatly from his hangover to think of molesting Lanya tonight. The man was able to throw off the after-effects of a heavy drunk in a short time. Hatfield had noticed that during his stay at the Roost. Shayne's going to the cook shack for a meal proved that he was not feeling too badly.

Robusto was at the patio gate, in the shadows. He had a rifle in the crook of his arm, and no doubt intended to use it if Shayne came toward the house. Hatfield saw the danger in that. A man whose nerve was gone or had become wobbly was never much good with a gun. And

if Robusto missed his first shot, Shayne would give him no chance to fire a second time.

Keeping his voice low, Hatfield asked, "Are the vaqueros armed again?"

Robusto spoke in a whisper, but even so anger edged his voice. "No," he said bitterly. "Only three of them. Old Hernandez and two others. The rest are afraid. The men with families have shut themselves up in their houses. And most of the others say we will all die if we fight the *bandidos*. But I will kill Shayne, and with the three who armed themselves I will fight his compadres.

Hatfield reached out to lay a hand on Robusto's arm. It was shaking violently.

"You're too shaky," he said. "You'll not kill Shayne. He'll kill you."

"All the same, I'll try to kill him."

Hatfield shook his head. "You leave Shayne to me," he said. "I'll be at the house, and I'll try to disarm him and hold him as a hostage. If I can't pull that off, there'll be shooting. That will be the signal for you and Hernandez and the other two to fight. If I kill Shayne, I'll join you, and we'll have a good chance of winning out. If he kills me—well, you'll have a tough time of it. You and the others place yourselves where you can cover the bunkhouse door with your rifles. Then open fire when the outlaws come out. Savvy?"

"I don't like it. I would do it my way."

"You're sure you can shoot straight enough to kill Shayne with one shot?"

Robusto hesitated. "No, I am not sure."

"Then play it my way, friend."

"If I could trust you, Senor Dolan. But you are one of his men."

Hatfield said sourly, "So are you—or you were. But you changed sides, didn't you?" He hardened his voice. "Now do as I say. Get away from this gate. Lose yourself in the shadows with the others."

He turned away without waiting to see if the man obeyed.

There was lamplight behind the curtained windows of the ranch house office. And when Hatfield knocked on the door, Lanya called, "Who is it?" in a shaky voice.

Hatfield almost gave his own name, caught himself just in time. "Dolan," he said. "I'm going to stay with you tonight. Shayne—"

He needed say no more. He heard her slide the bolt on the door. She swung the door open, and said at once, "He's coming here again?"

He stepped inside, closed the door. "You can count on it," he told her. "And I want him to. I'm going to jump him, Lanya." He didn't bolt the door.

She held her small revolver, but turned and laid it on the desk. When she faced him again, her eyes were aglow.

"I'm grateful to you," she said. "There's good in you, Tom Dolan."

"Robusto is loyal to you," he said. "He was waiting outside to kill Shayne. I talked him out of it, not wanting to see Robusto get killed, as he surely would. He's not as tough a man as he likes to think, but he's a good man."

SHE regarded him curiously. "Why do you talk to me of Robusto?"

He smiled, shrugged. "Maybe because I see him as the way out of your troubles," he said. "I'm sort of a rough, tough hombre to be playing Cupid, but it seems to me that if you had a husband you wouldn't be fair game for every man who takes a fancy to you—or to your X Bar X Ranch."

"I've been thinking the same thing since you were here this afternoon."

"You're too young to go on being alone."

"You think I should marry Robusto?"

"He's in love with you."

"But I have no such feeling for him," she said. "Tom Dolan, why don't you speak for yourself? Or don't you find me attractive?"

He stared at her, startled by her words. "I think you're the most desirable woman I've ever known," he told her. "But — Well, I'm an outlaw. Such a man would be no good to you."

"I'd take a chance," Lanya told him. "I said there's good in you."

"But you have no feeling for me, no more than for Robusto."

"You're wrong, Tom."

He felt a rising excitement. He had told her the truth. She was the most desirable woman he'd ever known. But he was the Lone Wolf, and there was no place in his life for a woman. It was not in him to settle down to being a married man and a rancher. Besides, he sensed that whatever Lanya felt for him came only of his offering her his protection. Perhaps she thought herself in love with him at the moment, but it was likely she was mistaken. And he knew, too, that her feelings would turn to hatred when, as he would certainly have to do, he revealed that he was a Texas Ranger.

He shook his head. "I'm not the man for you, Lanya," he said. "No more than you say that Robusto is. You've got to understand that."

She was smiling, not hurt by his words. "You're a strange man, Tom Dolan," she said. "I think you want me. It's in your eyes. Why do you refuse to admit it?"

"I'm thinking of your own welfare."

"And because of that you'd tell me to find someone else?"

"Yes."

"But you can't blame any man who would risk as much as you are risking for me," she said. "You'll risk your life to save me from Shayne. No other man would do so much."

"I can name one."

She was amused. "Oh?"

"Ben Tyson. Remember how he stood up for you in his store?"

Her smile wavered. "Ben Tyson is a fine man," she said. "But he's not bold enough. I know he's in love with me, but he's as bashful as a schoolboy. He's frightened of me."

"He wouldn't be if you gave him some encouragement."

She shook her head. "I need a bold man, a strong man." She crossed to him, put her hands on his shoulders. "A man like you," she added after a long moment of looking into his eyes. "Tom, forget you're an outlaw. I —"

She broke off abruptly, a shocked look coming into her eyes. She had let her hands slide down from his shoulders to his chest, and the fingers of her right hand fumbled at his pocket. Alarm knifed through Hatfield as he realized that she had felt the Ranger badge in the pocket. She took the silver star-in-a-circle badge out, stared at it with seeming horror.

"You!" she gasped. "A Ranger!"

"Lanya, listen to me—"

But she made him the target of all her hatred for the Rangers. She flung the badge at him. It struck his chest, fell to the floor. He stooped to pick it up.

Lanya said wildly, "I'd rather have Shayne here than you!"

She whirled to the door, jerked it open. And screamed, "Shayne!"

EVEN as she screamed, she shrank back, and the man who had startled her, who had been standing just outside the door, stepped into the room. It was Ben Tyson. He was carrying his shotgun, and smiling wryly.

He closed the door, and said, "The door wasn't tightly closed, and just as I was about to knock I heard my name mentioned. Naturally, I was curious. So I eavesdropped."

Neither Hatfield nor Lanya spoke.

Tyson went on, "Thanks for acting as my proxy, Ranger. But a man should always speak for himself." He looked directly at Lanya. "It seems that this is the time to do just that—and to stop being as bashful as a schoolboy. That's how you described me, wasn't it, Lanya?"

"I'm sorry, Ben. I wouldn't hurt you for worlds."

"You didn't hurt me. In fact, you opened my eyes."

As Tyson paused, his gaze intent upon the woman he loved, it seemed to Jim Hatfield that the man grew in stature. Then he realized that Ben Tyson might be slightly built and of only medium height, but that he had great character. He had kept silent about how he felt toward Lanya Forbes only because he knew she could see no living man as a mate because of the memory of her dead husband. Lanya did not understand Ben Tyson.

The man said, "I came here tonight because I was worried about you, Lanya. I thought you would need protection, even though a Ranger was planted in that outlaw crowd. But I'll go a step further. I've been in love with you since the first day you entered my store, Lanya. Will you marry me?"

Lanya gasped.

Hatfield smiled, but then said sharply, "Ben, watch it!"

He heard loud voices and pounding boots in the patio. Lanya's scream for Shayne had been heard by some of the outlaw crowd, and now the man was coming with some of his men.

The door burst open, and Tyson leaped aside just in time to avoid it slamming into him. He pivoted, swinging up his double-barreled shotgun. Hatfield drew one of his Colts. But Shayne and a half dozen of his men crowded into the room, their guns drawn and cocked.

Shayne's one-eyed gaze darted from Hatfield to Tyson, then to Lanya. "What's going on here, anyway?" he demanded. "What's this storekeeper want?"

It seemed to Jim Hatfield that he had never been closer to violent death. The odds were too great, even with Ben Tyson siding him. It might be that the merchant would never get a chance to cut loose with his shotgun, for at least four of the outlaws had him covered. All that had saved Tyson so far was Bucky Shayne's curiosity. The outlaw chief needed to know what was happening.

He moved toward Lanya, "You yelled for me. Why?"

"It was nothing," Lanya said, shrinking from him. "Nothing at all."

"What's Tyson want?"

"I—I don't know."

Lanya was backed against the desk now, and she reached behind her for the revolver that lay there. Shayne grabbed her by the arm, jerked her away from the desk, threw her into an armchair.

"Talk!" he ordered. "And let it be the truth!"

"He asked me to marry him."

Shayne sneered. "And because of that you yelled for me?" he said, and slapped her hard across the face. "You think I believe that?"

Hatfield started toward him. "Shayne, don't hit her again!" he said savagely. "She's upset, hysterical. She doesn't know what she's doing, or why she called for you."

Shayne swung about to face him. "I'm beginning to get mighty suspicious of you, Dolan," he said. "Just what are you doing here? Trying to make a deal of your own with her?" He looked at Lanya. "Is that it? Has this hombre been pulling something?"

LANYA'S face was pale except for her left cheek, which was red from Shayne's blow. She glanced at the Lone Wolf, and he wondered if it occurred to her that now she could have her revenge on the Texas Rangers. She had only to tell Shayne what he was, if hatred of the Rangers really obsessed her. But Lanya shook her head.

"He's not tried to pull anything with me."

Hatfield breathed more easily. It was possible that the situation might somehow change so that there would be no gun play while the odds against him were so great. Lanya wasn't going to give him away.

He said, "A lot of fuss about nothing. Let's go outside, Shayne."

But Bucky Shayne wasn't satisfied. "Not until I get to the bottom of this," he said. He turned toward Ben Tyson. "How'd you get in here without my men seeing you?"

Tyson was a game one. He gave Shayne a mocking smile. "I left my horse out a piece, came in on foot, from behind the house. What are you worried about, Shayne? I'm just a storekeeper, and you're the famous Major Bucky Shayne with a dozen men backing you up." He had a two-handed grip on his shotgun, and its twin muzzles were aimed at Shayne. "The lady told you the truth," he went on. "I asked her to marry me. I'm still waiting for her answer."

"Why'd she yell for me?"

"How should I know?"

Shayne cursed him. "You're pretty smart—you think," he said. He moved around behind the chair in which Lanya sat. To keep her from leaving it, he grabbed her hair with his left hand. "Now, you smart aleck," he told Tyson, "let's see you empty that shotgun at me!"

The shotgun wavered. One of the outlaws grabbed it from Tyson's hands, eased it off cock, flung it across the room. He clubbed Tyson with his gun, the barrel striking the merchant across the left cheek. Tyson cried out, fell to his knees.

Shayne laughed. He released Lanya's hair after rumpling it. "I figured he wouldn't pump scatter-shot into you, baby," he told her. "What's it matter why you called for me? You wanted me to come, and I'm here." He turned to his men. "Clear out," he ordered. "And take Dolan with you."

It was then that guns began to racket in the ranchyard. At first four rifle shots were all so close together they could not have come from a single weapon, and it flashed through Hatfield's mind that Robusto and the three vaqueros who had armed themselves had opened fire on the rest of Shayne's men as a distraction. They were trying to draw Shayne and the outlaws with him from the house, away from Lanya. More shots crashed, many shots. Men shouted, cursed. One, no doubt hit, screamed.

Shayne yelled, "Get out there, you fools! Those vaqueros are armed again!"

The six men crowded through the doorway. Outside, the guns had fallen silent. Either Robusto and the three vaqueros had been cut down, or had withdrawn. There was still a great deal of shouting but Hatfield thought it was being done by the outlaws. Bucky Shayne had started to follow the others from the house, but now he halted and gestured.

"Get out there, Dolan!" he said. "What are you waiting for?"

Hatfield turned toward the door. But instead of leaving, he closed the door and swung around to face Shayne.

Shayne backed away, halted between the chair in which Lanya sat and the desk. Lanya had her wits about her. She leaped from the chair and moved to the side of the room so that Shayne could not again use her as a shield. Ben Tyson picked himself up, stood swaying. He looked dazed.

Shayne said. "So you're crossing me, eh, Dolan?" His face was ugly with rage and hatred. "What do you aim to do? Kill me and take over my bunch?"

Hatfield saw no fear in Bucky Shayne. The man was as devoid of fear as he was of principles. Shayne's gun was steady, boring at the man he thought was Tom Dolan. That Hatfield's gun was aimed at him seemed to bother him not at all. He would start shooting in a moment, and the Ranger had a feeling that both would die. Unless he could somehow upset Shayne.

THERE was no longer any reason for Hatfield to masquerade as Tall Tom Dolan. Shayne would try to kill him now no matter who the man thought him to be. But the truth might jolt Shayne so that the cocked gun in his hand would be less steady.

Hatfield said, "You should guess again. I'm not out to take over your wild bunch. You've made a big mistake about me. You see, Shayne, I'm a Texas Ranger."

It *was* a jolt. But Shayne merely gave a start. His gun did not waver. The room was tautly silent. Lanya Forbes pressed against the wall. Ben Tyson had stopped swaying, stood motionless. The two men with guns aimed at each other, lawman and outlaw, were like statues for a moment, even their eyes unblinking.

Then the Lone Wolf said, "Drop your gun, Shayne. You're under arrest."

"You think you can get away with this, with my men outside?"

"Sure. I can handle them. Like you once said, they're a bunch of ignoramuses."

"And you'll take me to Austin as a prisoner?"

"That's it," Hatfield said. "The way I see it, friend, you've got a decision to make. You can shoot it out with me now,

and the two of us will die. Or you can submit to arrest and hope that your men can keep me from taking you away from here. What's it to be, Shayne?"

The outlaw smiled in ugly fashion. "I'll submit, and let my boys take care of you, Ranger," he said. He eased his gun off cock and threw it to the floor.

Ben Tyson got the gun, careful not to get between Shayne and Hatfield's six-shooter. The merchant moved back, covering the outlaw with the gun.

Tyson said, "He's playing it smart, Hatfield. His men will never let you take him away from here. Unless you've got a way to trick them."

"I've got a way," the Ranger said. "Lanya, will you get some rope and something to gag him with?"

Lanya said, "Yes, of course," and hurried out of the room.

Hatfield said, "Ben, we're going to tie him up. And gag him so that he can't tip off his men that I'm a Ranger. Then I'm going out there and as Tall Tom Dolan I'll tell them Shayne says they're to get those supplies on the mules. And while they're busy—"

"Smart," Shayne cut in. "But you won't get away with it. There'll be a slip-up. They won't leave without me. They'll come hunting me."

Hatfield went on imperturbably, "And while they're busy loading that stuff for General Merardo on the mules, I'll get the X Bar X vaqueros together. Then—"

He broke off as the shooting outside began again.

Lanya returned from some other part of the house. She carried a lariat, and a scarf that could be used to gag Shayne. The outlaw no longer had himself under control. He looked wildly about, seeking a means of escape. Tyson took the lariat from Lanya, then stepped behind Shayne.

"Put your hands behind you, Shayne," he ordered.

Shayne muttered an oath, then pivoted toward the desk. With one hand he snatched Lanya's little revolver, and with the other he grabbed the lamp. Whipping about, he hurled the lamp at Hatfield. The Lone Wolf fired a shot at him as he ducked, but missed. The lamp struck the door, shattered explosively. The room was plunged into inky darkness.

Shayne's gun cracked, its muzzle flash bright in the darkness. Then the man was in motion, and again a shot fired by Hatfield missed. The next instant Shayne was crashing through a window.

The Ranger made the mistake of running to the window through which the man had disappeared. Then, rather than risk gashing himself on the jagged glass, he turned toward the door.

As he plunged out onto the gallery, he had a glimpse of Shayne running along it. The fleeing man left the gallery, darted past the well in the patio, scrambled over the adobe wall like an agile monkey, dropped from Hatfield's sight.

Hatfield did not go to the wall, feeling sure that Shayne would be waiting on the other side to pick him off. He crossed the patio to the gate. Guns were still racketing in the ranchyard. There was enough moonlight to show four men sprawled lifelessly. He had the impression that they were all outlaws.

PAUSING in the gateway, he saw that Shayne's surviving men were firing at the closed door of the barn. Robusto and the vaqueros were forted up in there. Loop-holes had been cut in the heavy door, and two rifles returned the outlaws' fire from them.

The outlaws were being stood off. They were firing from the cover of the bunkhouse and the cook shack, and Hatfield counted six guns in action on their side. Bucky Shayne had brought a dozen men with him to the X Bar X Ranch. Eleven, not counting Hatfield. Dutch Brucker had been killed by Sailor Dunn. Four others lay dead in the ranchyard. So the count was right. Only six of the group were left alive, and Bucky Shayne did not appear now to give them a hand.

Shayne was trying to make a getaway!

Hatfield hesitated a moment longer, then made his decision. Shayne was the important one; the man who should be

destroyed. But Robusto and the three loyal vaqueros deserved a helping hand. Hatfield decided to give it to them.

He waited for a lull in the shooting, then shouted, "Listen, men! This is Tall Tom Dolan, and I've got something to tell you!"

There was a sudden silence, with even the guns in the barn stilled.

Then Sailor Dunn called, "Say it, Tom!"

"Shayne's gone!" Hatfield yelled, and hoped that this was the last time that he would have to play the rôle of Tall Tom Dolan. "He's run out on us!"

Angry oaths came from the outlaws.

Hatfield called, "I say we get out of here! What's the use of fighting when even Shayne knows it's a losing fight, and wants no part of it?"

There was silence again for a moment, then Sailor Dunn yelled, "Let's get out of here!"

And the next instant the six outlaws were running for their horses.

They rode away from the X Bar X headquarters at a gallop.

But for the Lone Wolf the fight wasn't won. Bucky Shayne was still alive, and Ranger Jim Hatfield wouldn't have any peace of mind until he hunted the man down.

CHAPTER X

Death—for Law and Order

GONZALES, the X Bar X *mayordomo,* opened the barn door for Hatfield, then lighted a lantern. The old ranch boss was unharmed except for a bloody bullet crease in his left arm. One of the vaqueros had not been hit at all. But another was dead, and Robusto O'Reilly lay barely conscious, with three bullet wounds in him. Hatfield knelt beside him.

"You put up a good fight, amigo," he said.

"The señora?"

"She is unharmed."

Robusto smiled. "There is one thing worrying me, Señor Dolan. I—"

The Lone Wolf said, "Jim Hatfield is the name, Robusto. I'm a Texas Ranger."

"Oh? Now I savvy you."

"What's this thing that's worrying you?"

"I once tried to have you killed. I am sorry about that."

Hatfield said, "Forget it. I have." He rose and looked at old Hernandez. "Ben Tyson is at the house. He knows a little about doctoring. Maybe he can do something for Robusto."

"*Si.*" Gonzales said. "I will get him."

Hatfield left the barn with him, then went to saddle Goldie. He was ready to mount when Gonzales came from the house with Ben Tyson.

He said, "Ben, did you send my note to Captain McDowell?"

Tyson nodded. "Within an hour after you and Shayne's crowd left my place," he said. "McDowell should have it by now. Maybe he's already on his way to the Big Bend. He'll lead his Rangers straight to the outlaw hide-out, I imagine. Did Shayne get away?"

"Yeah," Hatfield said. "But I'm going after him."

He mounted and rode from the ranchyard, following the road south. The fleeing outlaws were already lost in the darkness, and he had an idea that they would not stop until they reached the Roost. And then they would not be safe. Captain Bill McDowell and a company of Rangers would swoop down on the hidden canyon before too long. But of course the outlaws knew nothing of that.

Hatfield didn't stay on the road for miles. He turned off it toward Carter Styles's ranch headquarters. Knowing that Shayne had not entered the X Bar X yard to get a mount after escaping over the patio wall, he was sure that the outlaw had headed for Styles's place where he could obtain a horse.

He held Goldie to a walk as he approached the ranch buildings. The windows of Styles's small house glowed with lamplight. Hatfield reined in and, in spite of a growing impatience for the showdown, waited to see what would happen.

He felt certain that Shayne had arrived, and was now telling his partner that the outlaws' visit to the X Bar X Ranch had turned into a fiasco. He could imagine Styles's rage. The man would brand Shayne a blunderer. They would probably argue for a time, then fear would decide them on flight.

Unless Shayne had a great deal of loot at the Roost, more than he wanted to lose, they would not head for the canyon. By now they would have figured out that Hatfield's joining the band had been for the sole purpose of locating their hide-out so that it could be raided by a force of Rangers strong enough to round up the entire outlaw band. They would be wary of riding into a trap, for they could not know how soon the Rangers would spring the trap.

The door of the house opened, and a man carrying a lighted lantern crossed to the corral. It was Shayne. Hatfield watched the outlaw set the lantern on the ground, take a lariat off a saddle on the corral fence, and enter the pen. The awakened horses began a wild milling, and their racket covered the sound of Goldie's shod hoofs as Hatfield rode forward.

Shayne made his throw and led a reluctant bronc from the corral. Hatfield dropped from saddle. Shayne lifted a saddle from the corral fence, turned toward the horse.

"Shayne!"

The Lone Wolf's voice was pitched low, but a shout would not have startled Bucky Shayne more. The outlaw dropped the saddle, whirled in Hatfield's direction. He ripped out an oath and grabbed for the six-shooter that he must have got from Carter Styles. He began shooting as fast as he could work hammer and trigger. But for once Shayne was rattled, and his shots were wild. The Ranger's gun spoke but once.

And Bucky Shayne cried out, staggered, fell against the corral fence.

HE DID not lose his gun, however, and he lifted it and tried to aim carefully for what could only be his last shot. Be-

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fore he could fire, Carter Styles came from the house at a run with a gun in his hand. With Shayne's gun beading him from the front and Styles's from the left side, the Lone Wolf showed his gun wizardry. He drove another shot into Shayne, then fired twice at Styles and targeted him before the man got out a single shot.

Styles was dead before he hit the ground, but Bucky Shayne was a harder man to kill. The Lone Wolf's second shot had driven him to his knees. He was braced on his left hand, and again he was trying to bring his gun to bear.

"You've got me, Ranger," he said thickly. "But I'm taking you with me!"

Hatfield walked toward him, gun ready. Shayne was having trouble getting the big lawman in his sights, and before he could fire, the Lone Wolf was close enough to kick the weapon from his hand.

Bucky Shayne cursed him again, but in a feeble whisper, then fell forward onto his face and did not move again.

There was no regret in Jim Hatfield. The deaths of these two men would not shatter his peace of mind. He turned and mounted Goldie as tardily, four vaqueros came from the bunkhouse.

One called fearfully, "Señor Styles!"

They saw Shayne's body lying in the glow of the lantern and their dead *patron* sprawled over by the house.

Hearing Goldie stamp a shod hoof, one called, *"Quien es? Quien es?"*

Hatfield said, "This is a Texas Ranger. Never mind."

He turned away, and they did not try to stop him.

Reaching the road, he turned north toward the X Bar X. He would reassure the people there, tell them they no longer needed to fear Bucky Shayne and Carter Styles. Then he would make his way back to the Roost. Captain Bill McDowell and his Rangers wouldn't need his help to round up the outlaw bunch in the hidden canyon, but still he wanted to be on hand at the end. Too, his chief would want to know at the earliest moment that Bucky Shayne had been dealt with. One thing he meant to do—he would put in a good word for Sailor Dunn to whom he owed his life.

A voice challenged from the shadows of the X Bar X yard.

It was Hernandez Gonzales, still standing guard.

Hatfield told him, "It's over, amigo. Shayne is dead. And Carter Styles."

"Bueno."

Hatfield rode on to the house, dismounted at the gate. Ben Tyson was alone in the office, taking it easy in an armchair and smoking a cigar. He started to rise, but Hatfield told him to remain seated.

"I'm not staying, Ben," he said. "I just came back to tell you that Shayne won't

cause Lanya any more trouble. Nor will Styles."

"They're dead?"

"That's it."

"Well, it's good riddance," Tyson said. "If the rest of those outlaws are rounded up, it will prove that the Big Bend can have law and order just like the rest of Texas."

"You did what you could for Robusto?"

Tyson nodded. "He'll be all right," he said. "He's rawhide-tough. Lanya is still with him. I hope he's tough enough to take what she has to tell him." The merchant took a long puff on his cigar. Then he said, "She's going to do me the honor of becoming Mrs. Tyson."

"It'll hit Robusto hard," Hatfield said. "He's in love with her. But— Well, a man gets over a thing like that just as he sometimes gets over a bullet wound. Congratulations, Ben."

"Thanks."

"I'll say so long now. I'm riding back to the Roost."

"Wait a few minutes. Lanya will want to thank you."

Hatfield smiled. "Maybe it will be easier for her and for me if we don't see each other again," he said, and turned to the door.

THE Ranger was but midway through the patio when Lanya called to him. He turned and she came hurrying to him. She was breathless when she faced him. But for the first time he saw her smiling. He sensed her happiness.

"Ben told me about Shayne and Styles," she said. "I—"

"And he told me that you said 'yes' to him."

"I've been foolish. But no longer. I think I fell in love with Ben when he asked me to marry him. Do you think that's possible, Jim?"

"Sure it is."

"I want to tell you that I've stopped being foolish about the Texas Rangers, too."

"I'm glad."

"And to prove it—" Lanya said. She moved closer, lifted her hands to his face and quickly kissed him. "You'll always be welcome here. Ben and I will always be glad to see you."

He nodded, said, "I'll stop by some time," and turned away.

He mounted Goldie and rode from the ranchyard, south along the dark road, south toward the hidden canyon. He hoped that Robusto O'Reilly *was* rawhide-tough. It was hard for a man to lose a woman like Lanya Forbes who, no doubt, would never again be called the Desert Witch. He lifted his hand to his lips, and it seemed that he could still feel the caress of her lips. Yes, it was hard to lose a woman like that.

Hard even for the Lone Wolf. • • •

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Slim landed a powerful blow

Once a Texan...

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

SLIM CARTER whistled *Lorena* tunelessly as he picked up the pan of bread dough and spun on a heel to carry the dough to a shaded spot beneath the chuckwagon. Something caught across his right ankle and he pitched forward, lost his balance and sprawled flat on his face with the dough pan upside down on the gritty earth.

A loud raucous laugh jangled against his ears. He did not have to look up to

Slim had almost forgotten that a true Texas man didn't stop to count the odds. He made his own

know that Bart Cluskey was at his practical jokes again.

"What's the matter, Sourdough? Ain't you learned to handle them big feet of yourn yet?" Bart roared with laughter, snaking in the rope which he'd set to unbalance the sprawling cook.

Slim hunched back on his heels and looked up at Bart. Bart was big all around, tall and heavy. His buckskin shirt was open down to his navel and the wiry black hairs that covered his chest glistened with sweat. His hard green eyes ran with tears as he slapped his thighs and doubled over in his mirth.

For a tense moment Slim was tempted to get up and take one good crack at Bart but he knew better. He had seen Joe Payne, the wrangler, get smashed to bloody ruin by the big man.

"No hard feelin's," called Bart as he swaggered over to the camp in a motte of cottonwoods.

Slim got up and leaned against the side of the wagon. Thank God the drive to Dodge was almost over. He'd get paid off and get a job cooking in the cowtown. Bart's jokes had increased to the point where Slim was tempted to drygulch him.

He scratched his long nose, ran a hand over his sparse mustache and looked down at his body. An old flour sack apron was twisted almost twice about his thin middle. His knobby knees thrust themselves out against his worn pants. He was a hell-uva looking Texan. Maybe Kansas would be better for him. His shoulders sagged.

Slim ate his supper off the tailgate of the chuckwagon and then picked up the huge coffeepot. The boys would be ready for their second cups by now. He crossed to the motte.

Bart was leaning back against his bedroll and talking as usual. "Waal, we was at Gettysburg, as I said. On Lee's right. The bluebellies were forted up on some round hills there, and my colonel comes to me. 'Bart,' he says—he allus called me by my Christian name—'Bart,' he says, 'can you dig them Yankees out?' 'Yes,' I says, 'but I'll do it alone.' I loads my Enfield careful-like and snakes forward. In one hour, mind you, I had seven more notches on the butt of that old musket. The regiment moves forward after that and the colonel promotes me to sargint on the spot."

Slim circled the ring of punchers filling the tin cups with the strong coffee. All of them were veterans. But none except Bart Cluskey had been with Hood's Texans, the battering ram—the elite—of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Hood's Division was composed of the Fourth and Fifth Texas and the Third Arkansas. And Bart had been with them from Eltham's Landing on through to Appomattox.

"Waal, here's my boy!" called Bart. He grinned at Slim. "You was in the war too, wasn't you, Sourdough?"

Slim nodded as he filled Sam Gordon's cup. The trail boss looked up at him, and there seemed to be a message in his sun-faded eyes. Stick it out, Slim, they seemed to say. Only a few more days.

"Who was you with, Sourdough?" persisted Bart.

SLIM straightened up and looked Bart in the eye. "I was with Devoe's Partisan Rangers," he said quietly.

"Do tell," said Bart politely, "A fightin' outfit, I expect?"

Slim shrugged. "We were at Fort Lancaster all during the war. Had a few skirmishes with the Comanches. That's all." To hell with him. Let him worry the bones all he liked.

Bart roared with laughter. "Comanches! Half-naked savages with bows and arrows!"

"Damned hard fighters," said Yancy Smith quietly, "And no quarter."

Bart scowled. "I didn't ask you, Yancy."

Yancy yawned. "You aimin' to make somethin' out o' it, Cluskey?"

Tension settled about the campfire. Men set down their cups and stared at the two. Yancy was quiet but deadly with the single Navy Colt he carried low on his thigh. Bart wore two staghandled Colts in ornate holsters. He was a gun tipper, hanging his holsters on pins so that he might

fire through the open bottoms without drawing. Yancy's eyes never wavered. Bart grinned. "No offense, Yancy." The tension eased off. Bart motioned to Slim to fill his cup. He grinned up at Slim as Slim poured. "Devoe's Partisan Rangers, hey?"

"My youngest brother Ory was with Hood," Slim said.

"Maybe he was a swamper?" suggested Bart. "I never knew him."

An icy finger traced the length of Slim's spine. Ory and he had been close. He had taught the kid how to ride and how to shoot at their dad's little spread along the Trinity. Ory had learned fast and in no time had become better than Slim. He had been a handsome laughing kid when he had gone to war with Hood.

"Well?" asked Cluskey.

"He died at Antietam," said Slim. He walked quickly to the chuckwagon. He had to get chow ready for the men coming in from the herd. The night herders were already saddling their horses. A fork of lightning lanced across the evening sky. The air was heavy. Might be a storm was working up.

Sam Gordon limped up to the chuckwagon, the minie ball be still carried in his right thigh giving him trouble in the damp air. He placed a friendly hand on Slim's shoulder. "Don't let him rile you, Slim. He's a loudmouth. I don't want any trouble on this drive. He killed a man on the last drive for bristling up to him."

"Yeah," said Slim bitterly, "Lennie Norwich—from my part of the country. A nice kid."

Sam nodded. "Bart claims Lennie drew on him. Bart was allus ridin' Lennie like he does you. None of us was there when it happened. Watch him, Slim. He's ornery. You'll ride it out to Dodge without makin' trouble?"

Slim looked Sam in the eye. "I won't promise that, Sam. I'm full up to here." Slim drew a long finger across his throat. "I hate his guts. But I promise I won't start nothing."

"Bueno! I'm sick of the sight of him myself but he's a good puncher. I needed him. Him and his damned war stories. You'd think he fought the whole damned war hisself. Wonder we didn't win with Bart on our side."

AFTER Slim fed the herders he crawled into his bedroll and lay for a long time watching the lightning fork across the skies.

All his life he had been the butt of jokes because of his lean build and his mournful face. He had enlisted with Devoe's Partisan Rangers because old man Devoe had promised them glory in the front of battle and Slim wanted to impress Susan Ordright. But Devoe was a politician and had wangled assignment to lonely, dusty Fort Lancaster. The Rangers had lasted out the war there, gambling, horseracing and occasionally chasing a few marauding Comanches. His one break had come when Sibley had beaten the drums throughout Texas for his invasion of New Mexico. But Slim had been down with fever and so had missed that one chance for glory in battle.

The death of Ory at Antietam had been another bitter blow. It was then he had found out Susan had been in love with Ory.

He closed his eyes. Susan had always liked Slim. Guess she still did. She had gotten over Ory's death enough to attend a few dances with Slim but he had never had the guts to ask her for her hand. He'd bury himself in Dodge. To hell with Texas. To hell with the Trinity. To hell with Bart Cluskey.

The first drops of rain smacked against Slim's face. He yawned and rolled over beneath the wagon. The huge drops pelted the dry earth and a smell of dust hung in the air. Thunder rumbled in the north and the sky was lit with an eerie flickering blue.

The rain suddenly beat down in a mad tattoo, splashing under the wagon. The cookfire hissed out and the canvas top of the wagon flopped wildly. Slim felt for his pipe. Someone shouted over at the camp. He raised himself and stared through the pouring rain. The voice was urgent. Men

shouted at each other. A slickered figure ran through the rain. "Slim! Hey, Slim!" It was Yancy Smith. "The herd is runnin'! Sam is afraid of a stampede! We need every hand!"

Slim threw aside his bedroll and pulled on his boots. He clapped his hat on his head and fumbled in his bedroll for his gunbelt. He raised himself to buckle it on and cursed luridly as his head hit the bottom of the wagon. He dragged his poncho from his warbag and scrambled into it on the run. He was half-soaked from the driving rain before it covered him. He snatched his saddle from the back of the wagon and ran for the horse herd. Joe Payne roped out his cayuse, a blocky pinto. "Looks bad!" shouted Joe above the storm, "Good luck, amigo!"

Slim kneed the pinto away from the herd and lashed it toward the camp. Sam Gordon waved him on as the punchers splattered off in the darkness. Slim peered through the rain. In the distance he saw pinpoints of light and faint reports carried to him on the wind. The boys were trying to mill the herd. In a few moments they were up behind the slow running steers.

The critters' hides glistened wetly and their heads tossed as they moved forward ponderously. The boys balled up alongside the herd, riding hard and throwing the weight of their ponies against the sides of the steers. One of the boys cursed. His pony had hit a prairie-dog hole and thrown him. Yancy Smith swung out long enough to drag the dismounted man up behind him and pull out from the running herd.

FOR AN hour Slim worked as he had never worked in his life. Time and time again the punchers drove in at the herd, their sixguns sparkling in the darkness as they tried to mill the stubborn beasts. But the steers increased their pace. Sheets of rain drove in on them. Thunder crashed intermittently and the sky was laced with weird light from the heavens. A steer horn raked Slim's left thigh. He could feel the blood trickling warmly down his leg and settling in the bottom of his left boot. Rain leaked beneath his poncho and soaked him to the skin. His sombrero disappeared in the darkness, sailed from his head by a blast of icy wind. His hair hung down wetly across his eyes.

Hail clattered savagely and brought blood from Slim's battered flesh. On and on the herd went, splashing across knee deep streams that had been bone dry at evening time. It was a hell of tossing horns, bellowing steers, lashing rain and howling wind. Slim lost his sixgun in the mess. He lashed at the steers with his quirt and shouted until his voice gave out.

Suddenly he found himself at the front of the herd. His pinto was gouged by a steer. He set off at a dead run across the front of the pounding herd. Slim battled the stubborn cayuse but it was no use. He raked it with his spurs and pounded its head with a fist, but the maddened animal kept on its own way.

Slim looked back. The front of the herd was a wavering row of racing steers, their wicked horns glistening wetly in the lightning flashes. He was all alone. A shout came above the howl of the storm. He looked forward. A puncher was standing beside his fallen cayuse. Slim swung the pony with superhuman strength. He hammered up beside the puncher. It was Bart Cluskey. Bart timed himself and leaped in. He dragged at the reins. The pony stopped.

"Get on behind!" yelled Slim.

Bart's eyes were wide with fright as he reached up. A big hand clamped on Slim's right arm. Before Slim realized what was happening he was dragged from the saddle. Bart fought the maddened pinto and swung up into the saddle. As Slim got to his feet Bart's right boot shot out. It struck Slim's jaw and he went down again, the spur opening a gash along his chin. Bart sank the iron deep into the pinto's flanks and raced off to one side of the herd.

Slim got to his feet and ran through the darkness. He could hear the pounding hoofs closing in. He saw a dark line ahead

of him. It was a rushing stream. He plunged into the water. He looked wildly up and down the stream and then in desperation dived beneath an overhanging bank.

In a moment the stream was filled with a mass of panicked steers, smashing into each other, bawling in their insensate fury. Slim shrank back beneath the bank, the icy water pouring up to his chin, the bank shuddering with the pound of hoofs. Mud splashed up against his face blinding him. He went under and fought to the surface. Prayers flowed from his lips. He closed his eyes. The bank shuddered with the pounding of stampeding hoofs and he feared it would give way and he would be buried under a ton of earth.

For what seemed hours he shrank beneath the bank as the herd poured over it, churning the muddy water into froth. Steers went down and died in the water, mashed to a pulp beneath the sharp hoofs. Suddenly it was all over. The last of the herd pounded past and disappeared into the lightning-shot night.

SLIM DRAGGED himself from beneath the bank. He dropped flat on the bank. The rain had stopped. A watery dawn was breaking in the east. Slim sat for a long time with his head in his hands and then got up. He limped doggedly to the south. The boys would want chow.

It was almost noon when Slim saw the motte of cottonwoods. He had crossed an area churned into muddy pulp by the herd. Steer carcasses were but mounds of bloody flesh trampled into the mud. Smoke wavered up thinly from the motte. Slim limped up to the first tree and leaned against it. A dozen of the boys were hunkered about a small fire. His chuckwagon was mashed flat in the mud. Fragments of bedroll lay scattered about the motte. Ponies stood with hung heads at the edge of the camp.

Sam Gordon stood up from the fire. "We milled them all right, Slim. We thought you were trampled. Get some coffee, hombre."

Slim limped up to the fire. Bart Cluskey was squatted by the fire nursing a cup of coffee. His pale green eyes studied Slim. Slim looked about. "Where's Yancy?" he asked dully.

"With the herd. Ebbetts Fisher won't ride no more," said Sam.

"The rest of the boys all right?"

"Beat up some but still ridin'."

Slim looked at Bart. "You murdering bastard," he said quietly. "You dirty murdering bastard."

Bart set down his cup and stood up. He flexed his muscles. "What was that you said?"

Slim came closer. "You heard me!"

"What's all this?" asked Sam.

Slim never took his eyes from Bart. "This coyote lost his cayuse. I stopped in front of the herd to pick him up. He took my cayuse and left me there."

Bart's hands slid down to his twin Colts. Joe Payne slid his hand inside his shirt and drew out a snub-nosed derringer. "Keep your hands away from them plow-handles, Cluskey," he said. Sam Gordon stepped quickly behind Cluskey and pulled his Colts from their holsters. He looked at Slim. "You speakin' the truth, Slim?"

Slim nodded.

Sam stepped back. "It's your fight, Slim."

Bart's right fist smashed out but Slim danced back. Bart's left whistled past his face. Slim poked out a long left arm and drew blood from Bart's beak of a nose. Bart grinned and came on in. His right thudded over Slim's heart. His left smacked against Slim's jaw and Slim sat down hard. He shook his head. Bart grinned. "Had enough, Sourdough?"

Slim got to his feet. Twice more he hit the muddy ground. His mouth was full of blood. He got up doggedly and began to carry the fight, taking three blows to get in one. His long reach kept Bart's bull-like rushes at bay but his ribcage ached from the pounding of those big paws. He speared out long blows that ripped up the big man's face. Bart came in again and again with murder in his pale eyes. His foot slipped in the mud at the instant Slim

brought in a right jab. He went down and lay still for a moment, his breath coming hard in his chest. He looked at Sam Gordon. "When I get up I'll kill him," he said thickly. "You goin' to stop this?"

SAM shook his head. "You get right up and try, Bart. Slim is doin' fine."

For the first time that day Slim smiled. As Bart got up he hit him with all his strength in the belly and smashed a left to the square jaw. Bart went down and then got up. Jumping to one side he snatched up a billet of wood and rushed at Slim. Joe Payne stuck out a foot and Bart sprawled full length. Bart looked up at Joe. "I'll settle with you later."

Joe grinned wickedly. "Much obliged for the offer. But will you be able to, amigo?"

From some unknown source Slim felt a surge of strength. His long lean body was rawhide but he had never been a scrapper. Something had changed him. He straightened Bart with a left and landed a right that split Bart's mouth open. Blood streamed from the knuckles gashed by Bart's teeth. Bart shook his head. He threw a looping right. Slim stepped in and brought up an uppercut that jolted the deliverer to his heels. Bart went back, fell heavily and tried to get up. He shook his head and lay there staring dazedly at Slim. Slim stood over him.

"Give him the boot," said Joe.

Slim shook his head. "He was with Hood," he said—"with my brother."

"He's a damned liar," said Joe. "He never was with Hood. I saw him with Quantrill's Guerillas at the end of the war. He knew that. That's why he beat hell out of me. To keep me quiet."

A deadly quiet settled over the ring of men. Sam Gordon looked at Bart. "That right, Cluskey?"

Bart looked from one to another of the men who had fought legally for the Confederacy. There was no pity there. Sam cocked one of Bart's staghandled Colts. "That right, Cluskey? Talk, or by God I'll cut you down with your own gun!"

A sickening hate welled up in Slim as Bart nodded. He bent down and dragged the puncher up by his shirt front. His right smashed against Bart's mouth. "That's for Lennie Norwich, guerilla." His left slashed against Bart's right eye. "That's for Ory, my brother, who died at Antietam." He shoved the big man back and hit him with all his strength. "And that's for Slim Carter, of Devoe's Partisan Rangers!" Bart went down. Slim raised a boot but Sam shoved him back. "That's enough! He's done, I tell you!" Slim shoved him aside and picked up the billet of wood Bart had gone after him with. "I'll kill him," he said thickly. Sam swung the Colt alongside Slim's head and Slim passed out into a darkness shot with pinwheels of light.

When Slim came to he was lying with his head propped against a saddle. The boys were hunkered down watching him. His jaw was swollen. Sam grinned down at him. "Sorry, Slim. I want no murders on this drive. Cluskey's gone. If I see him again I'll cut down on him for sure. No hard feelin's?"

"No hard feelings," said Slim as he got up. "I'd best see if I can rustle up some grub for you boys."

"There goes a fightin' Texas son-of-a-gun if I ever seen one,"—someone said, as Slim walked slowly to his ruined chuckwagon. Slim grinned and regretted it instantly as his face ached like a sore tooth. He looked to the south. He'd have to get back to see Susan. He was through fooling around. No real Texan would let a woman put him off for long.

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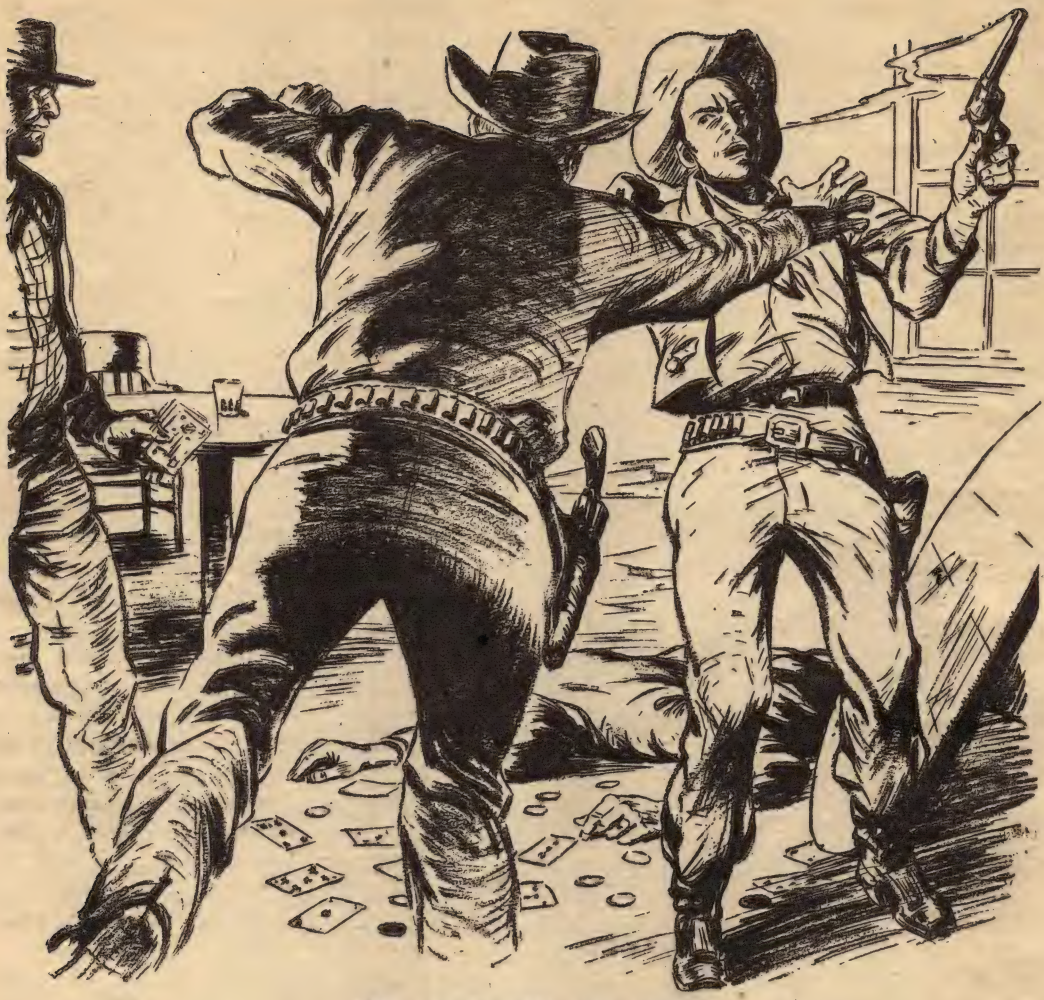

"Give me your gun!" Jesse shouted

Sixgun Stalemate

By JIM BREWER

With the son of his best friend running wild, Marshal Jesse Obler had a rough decision to make

MARSHAL JESSE OBLER had just finished his first round of the day, and was standing in front of his office smoking a cigarette when he saw Caleb Goodwin come riding along the dusty main street of Bootspur. He had been expecting the owner of the big Arrow Ranch for the past three days, but the sight of the

gray-haired rancher now, sitting his horse as though he were ruler of the entire West, aroused within him a feeling almost of terror. He hurried into his office so that he would not have to greet the rancher in public.

The door of the marshal's office opened, and the rancher came in with the hearty, confident smile of the successful man.

"Jess," he said, "you look fit enough to tangle with a grizzly."

"Howdy, Caleb." Jesse tried to keep his voice free of emotion. He sat down behind the scarred desk and pointed to a chair for Caleb.

Caleb sat down and cheerfully began discussing topics of the day, just as though this were an ordinary visit. Then he began to reminisce about the old days when they had been carefree cowboys without a care between them. Finally, after he had gotten Jesse into a responsive mood, he brought up the object of his visit.

"Jess," he said easily, "I thought I'd ride out to look at some graze this afternoon, and I'd like to have Clay along with me."

There it was. Jesse felt his heart go cold within him. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Caleb, but I can't do it this time."

"Why not?" Jesse could sense the irritation rising in Caleb's voice.

The marshal took a deep breath before he answered. "Because this isn't just another scrape. Clay almost killed that cowboy, and I want him to learn that he can't go around letting loose his temper on other people without paying the penalty, even if he is your son."

CLAY had provoked a fight in his loud, boorish way with Hank Higgins, a cowboy from a neighboring ranch. The puncher, thinking the fracas was over after he had knocked the youth to the ground, had turned his back on Clay. But Clay, seething with rage and humiliation, had struck him from behind with the nearest object, a brass spittoon, and knocked him unconscious. For three days Hank had lain in a coma, and only this morning had regained his senses.

Caleb considered Jesse's words for several moments. "Listen," he said, "I'm paying all of Hank's bills, and when he gets well I'll see that he gets a better job than he's ever held before. Now, can't we look at this thing reasonably?"

But Jess was adamant. "Clay has committed a crime and he's got to pay for it. Bootspur is a civilized town now, with laws which I have to enforce. I can't let him go free just because he's your son!"

"Damnation!" Caleb exploded. "Since when has it been a crime for two men to have a good old-fashioned fight?"

"This wasn't a good old-fashioned fight." Jess tried to keep his voice down. "Clay started it, then when he got knocked down he wouldn't get up. When Hank turned away, he hit him from behind."

Caleb sat looking at Jesse, his eyes slowly getting colder. "Then you won't let Clay out?" he asked.

Jesse felt uncomfortable beneath the steady stare of his pardner. He had to make Caleb understand what he was doing. "I can't," he said quietly. "I've watched Clay grow up just as though he were my son, and I've watched you spoil him every day of his life. If something isn't done for him damn soon, he'll go completely to hell. I think that six months in the county jail will do him more good than anything else in the world.

"Don't you understand, Caleb," he was almost pleading now, "I'm doing this for you as well as Clay. They'll teach him some discipline—"

Caleb had been listening to Jesse with a set look on his weather-beaten face. Now he lifted a hand interrupting the marshal.

"Thank you, Marshal," he said in a voice devoid of feeling. "But I think that Clay and I can get along without your help." He rose to his feet and left the small office without another word.

Jesse watched the door slam and he slowly let out his breath. He hadn't seen Caleb this angry in a long time. It took a lot to make Caleb angry, but when someone did, the rancher remembered it.

Jesse loved Caleb, as though the rancher were his brother, and he wouldn't have

hurt him for the world. Once they'd shared their last blanket together, and if necessary he would gladly do it again. But he realized that if someone didn't stop Clay now, the boy would get into more and more trouble until he ruined himself and possibly Caleb in the process. Regardless of what his old pardner thought of him, he had to see that Clay was punished for what he had done.

Hank Higgins was recuperating at Doc Slade's house, and Jesse got to his feet and started toward the medico's frame dwelling. He had just gone past the blacksmith shop when he saw the door of the doctor's house open and Caleb come out.

Caleb started up the street toward him, and as they passed each other he nodded to the rancher. But Caleb ignored him and a small smile played briefly on his lips.

Suddenly Jesse suspected what Caleb had done. He knocked at the door of the Slade house and was admitted to the room of the injured cowboy.

HANK HIGGINS lay in bed, a bandage covering most of his head. His face was white, but he smiled a greeting at the marshal.

Jesse sat down on the chair beside the bed. "How do you feel, Hank?" he asked.

"Great! Doc says I'll be up and around in a couple of weeks."

"That's fine. I'll have to ask him how soon you'll be well enough to attend a hearing."

A frown passed over Hank's face. "I've been thinking about that," he said. "It was just an ordinary fight, and this might just as easily have happened to Clay as it did to me. I don't think I'll press charges against him."

Jesse looked at the cowboy until Hank averted his eyes. "You mean to tell me you'd have hit him from behind with a spittoon when he wasn't looking? Hank, I know you better than that!"

Hank said nothing.

"Look," Jess continued, "Clay has been a headache to me ever since he's been old enough to come into town and throw his money around. Now I've got him where I want him, and this is your chance to get even with him, not only for yourself but for everybody else who hates his guts. With your help I can put him where his father can't do a thing for him. What do you say?"

"But. . ." Hank weakly waved his hands. "I got nothing against Clay. We grew up together. We've had lots of fights before this one, only this time it got rough. Why—"

"Never mind!" Jesse interrupted. He got to his feet and looked down at the cowboy. "Tell me, Hank, how much is Caleb paying you for this?"

For a moment all Hank could do was stare. Then: "What do you mean, Jess?"

Jesse laughed and turned away. "Forget it. If I was in your place, I'd probably do the same thing."

"So long, Hank, and get well soon."

Out on the street again, Jesse cursed. It was obvious. Caleb had gone to see the cowboy and paid him not to press charges against Clay. He was probably waiting at the jail for him now, to make sure of his son's release.

He grinned ruefully as he thought of Caleb. In this woman-scarce West, the rancher's friendship had been very important to him. He had helped Caleb build Arrow from a small two-by-four spread to the great ranch that it was now, and Caleb had helped him get and keep his job. They had been through a lot together during the twenty-five odd years they had been pardners.

Caleb was waiting for him at the jail, and the rancher was still angry. His eyes held no warmth as he watched Jesse come into the room.

"Marshal, if you're not going to press charges against Clay, I wish you'd release him."

Jesse hated to do it, but he had no alternative. If Hank didn't want to prosecute Clay, there was nothing he could do but let the boy go free.

"All right, Caleb, you outfoxed me this time. But there had better not be a next time, or I'll see that Clay pays if I have to be judge and jury myself!"

Jesse picked up a ring of keys and went into the small cell block. When he reappeared he was followed by a grinning Clay Goodwin. Jesse looked at his pardner, but the rancher avoided his eyes. Caleb turned and left the office without a word and his son followed him.

Jesse went to the window and watched them walk down the street. And a feeling of resentment toward Caleb began to kindle in his breast. He had been trying to help the rancher, but Caleb had made no effort to understand. Instead, he had grown angry. Hell, Clay was almost as much his son as he was Caleb's. He had been best man at the wedding, gotten drunk at the boy's birth, and made all the arrangements for the funeral of Clay's mother when Caleb had been too broken up to do anything but mourn. He sat down, trying to keep the bitterness from his mind.

HE CAME out of his reverie about an hour later and realized that it was time for him to make another round of the saloons. He put on his stetson and started down the dusty main street. His first stop was the Golden Hour Saloon and he found what he had expected to find there.

Clay Goodwin and some of his drinking companions were celebrating his release. Four of them sat at a small table, and a nearly empty bottle showed that they had lost no time in getting into the spirit of things.

Jesse nodded to the barkeeps and noticed the sudden silence that descended over Clay's table. Then the boy's voice rose raucously through the room.

"There's our big, brave marshal now!"

Jesse ignored the boy, but he felt everyone in the barroom turn and stare at him. One of Clay's companions whispered something to the youth.

"Don't worry about him," Clay continued loudly. "The old man is going to see that he loses his job!"

Jesse felt himself stiffen. So that was it. Because he had tried to do his duty, Caleb was going to use his influence and have him replaced as marshal. He felt a hurt anger rise within him.

"Hey, Marshal!" Clay shouted. 'What are you going to do when the town quits feeding you? Will you starve?"

There was a titter from the patrons of the Golden Hour Saloon. Jesse turned to look at Clay, and suddenly he was very sick of Caleb and Clay and the whole mess. He walked slowly to the table.

"Clay, I'm warning you just this once! As long as I'm marshal of Bootspur, you behave yourself! If I hear just one more complaint about you, if you step out of line once more, I'll throw you in jail so fast it'll make your head spin!"

Jesse spun on his heel and started to walk out of the saloon.

"That big blow don't scare me—" Clay began.

Jesse swung back and glared at Clay so viciously the boy broke off his sentence. Then he continued out the batwings.

Back in his office, he slumped miserably into his chair. Caleb's anger had taken a narrow personal turn. For trying to send Clay to the county jail, the rancher was going to take his job away from him. That was all right, he told himself. He was getting tired of his job and Bootspur anyway; it was time to move on. Then he saw a picture of himself drifting along aimless trails, staring into lonely campfires, trying to forget the life he had known as Caleb's friend and pardner; and he shuddered involuntarily.

As he brooded, day gave way into dusk and dusk into dark. When he glanced out the window he saw the islands of light made by the windows of adjoining buildings. He half-heartedly got up and lighted his own kerosene lamp.

Suddenly he heard the sound of running footsteps and then the door burst open and Smoky Haynor, one of Caleb's oldest cowhands, was facing him.

"Jess, you better come quick! That damn kid is going to get in trouble again!"

Jesse grabbed his stetson and led the way into the dark. As he ran along the warm, dusty street, he cursed.

"Smoky, I'm going to send that little brat to jail for as long as I can."

The swinging doors of the Golden Hour Saloon slammed open as he rushed through them. He blinked against the smoky, yellow light of the kerosene lanterns. He saw the crowd about the poker table and started pushing through them.

CLAY stood by the poker table with a drawn sixgun pointed at Stud Logan, one of the house gamblers. Five cards lay face up before the boy, and Stud had stopped in the act of raking in a pot. He stared calmly at Clay, his hands clutching the money.

Stud Logan was one of the few honest gamblers Jesse knew. An Easterner, he had come west for his health. He didn't care about money, and, as his health was improving, he went his way with a cheerful smile happy to make his living from the percentage he earned. He was a great favorite in Bootspur because his games were known to be honest.

"You dealt yourself cards from the bottom of the deck!" Clay was saying in a voice thick with drink.

"You're seeing things, Clay," Stud said lightly. He was trying to treat the matter as though it were a joke.

"You calling me a liar?" Clay demanded.

At that moment Stud caught a glimpse of Jesse pushing his way through the crowd. He leaned back in his chair.

"Why don't you go home and tell your father to take you into the woodshed," he said to Clay. "I think he must have been too busy to do it once."

Stud took his hands from the table and let them fall to his chair to push it back. It might have been misinterpreted as a move toward his gun. At any rate, Clay fired.

The gambler had half-risen to his feet. He stopped in mid-movement and looked with surprise at Clay. Then he collapsed over the table, upsetting it. The body fell to the floor and relaxed in death. And the dead hands were empty!

A horrified silence descended over the room as everyone stared at the dead gambler. The circle of men about Clay deepened as the others in the saloon came to look. Jesse stepped from between two onlookers and stood before the suddenly sober boy.

Clay stared at Jesse, terror stealing into his face. "I had to do it, Marshal. He went for his guns. It was either him or me!"

Jesse shook his head. "I saw it all, Clay!"

"Somebody tell him how it happened!" Clay shrieked. He looked around at the onlookers, and from the expressions on their faces saw how wrong he was. He looked back at Jesse, much as a cornered rat must look.

"Give me your gun, Clay!"

Terror widened Clay's eyes. He made no move to obey.

"Give me your gun!" Jesse repeated. He walked slowly toward the boy, his hand outstretched.

Something in Clay broke. "I'm not going to hang for this!" he shrieked. "It's a frameup!" The gun in his hand came up and exploded.

Jesse saw the movement and dived for the floor as a slug whined by his head. Clay turned and ran for the door as the crowd about them dispersed in a confused tangle of hurrying bodies.

Jesse leaped to his feet and drew his gun. "Stop, Clay!" he shouted.

Clay wheeled and fired another shot at Jesse which snarled harmlessly into the ceiling. Jesse fired. He wanted to shoot the youth in the thigh, to wound him and bring him down; but as he triggered Clay whirled for another shot at the marshal. The bullet caught the boy in the chest and he went down and lay still.

JESSE ran for the boy, but Smoky Haynor was kneeling over him when Jesse came to the body. The cowhand looked up into the marshal's eyes and shook his head.

"There's hell to pay," he said. "He's dead. You got him right through the heart!"

Jesse straightened as though struck by a lash. How would Caleb take this? He knew the rancher well enough to know what was going to happen next.

He gave orders for the care of the body,

then went out onto the dark sun porch. The batwing doors swung open behind him and Smoky Haynor stood by his side.

"Jess," the cowboy's voice was worried, "why don't you take a fishing trip into the mountains for a month or so?"

Jesse shook his head. "I did my duty and I'll face the consequences. Will you go out and tell Caleb what's happened?"

"You're crazy!" Smoky exploded impatiently. "In a month we can talk some sense into his head. Then we can let you know and you can come back and things will be the same again. . . ."

"Things will never be the same again," Jesse said, "they never are. And it's been my experience that you never solve anything by running from it. It only comes up to face you again. Caleb'll never forgive me for killing Clay, and my self-respect will never let me run as though I were ashamed of what I did. You can tell him I'll be waiting for him here if he wants me."

Smoky shook his head. "If that's the way you want it, good luck." He put his hand on Jesse's shoulder for a moment to show him that he understood, then moved off into the dusty darkness. Both men knew that Caleb would be in to kill the man who had shot his son as soon as he heard the news.

Jesse went back to his office and began putting his personal effects together. His belongings were few and in a few minutes he had them in a small pile on his desk. Then he lighted a cigarette and sat back in his chair to wait.

It would take Smoky two hours to ride out to Arrow, and Caleb two hours to come in. Allowing an hour for leeway, Caleb should be in Bootspur about dawn.

Curiously, Jesse's mind was at peace. He had made his decision and he knew it was the only decision he could have made. He sat now with the knowledge of what was going to happen at dawn in the back of his mind, and looked back over his relationship to Caleb with a sort of detached interest.

Little had they known some twenty years ago when, pardners, they had drifted into Bootspur, that it would end like this. Caleb, always ambitious, had been saving his money, and, finding a spread that appealed to him, had borrowed money from Jesse, pooled it with his own, and bought the then small Arrow Ranch. He had offered Jesse a partnership in the venture, but the younger man, never one to like that type of work, had declined. He had been content to be marshal and be near Caleb. Then Caleb had married, and now this. . . .

Jesse sprang to his feet and paced until he was tired. Then he sank back into his chair until he wearied of sitting. At times the minutes seemed to crawl by in an agony of slowness, at others, they seemed to fly by. And in this fashion, pacing and sitting, the night alternately flew and crawled by.

As the first frail fingers of dawn began to push against the night, Jesse went out into the street. Far out on the gray prairie his farsighted eyes discerned a movement which he knew must be Caleb.

He leaned back against the building and rolled himself a smoke. As the cigarette dissolved into delicious, fragrant lungfuls of vapor, he watched the movement develop into a horse and rider and that rider into Caleb.

THE rosy dawn had won its battle against night when Caleb rode by Jesse without looking at him and hitch-railed his horse in front of the Golden Hour Saloon. The rancher dismounted and unhurriedly slapped the dust from his levis. Then he stepped into the center of the street and began walking toward the marshal.

Jesse threw away his cigarette and stepped off the wooden sidewalk toward his old pardner. The two men moved toward each other until a distance of about fifteen feet separated them, then stopped.

Caleb stopped in a half-crouch, his hands poised over the butts of his guns. Jesse smiled at him, but the rancher's face was expressionless. From the back of one of the buildings a rooster crowed a greet-

ing to the dawn, the sound loud in the stillness of the morning.

"When that rooster crows again?" Jesse asked.

Caleb nodded.

Jesse assumed a position similar to Caleb's and waited. As the seconds went by, Jesse noted with surprise that he was sweating in the coolness of the dawn. The palms of his hands were moist, and beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. Still they waited, and suddenly the rooster crowed again, long and proudly.

Jesse's hands swept toward his guns as he watched Caleb draw. He cleared leather and aimed his gun at the swinging board sign over the Golden Hour Saloon and fired. At the same time he heard the explosion of Caleb's guns.

Nothing happened. No blow like that of a sledge hammer battered his body. He looked down and saw where Caleb's slugs had dug up the dirt about halfway between them. He glanced up at Caleb.

His pardner's lips were curled in a snarl. "What are you waiting for?" he shouted. "Can't you finish the job?"

And only then did Jesse understand. Caleb, like himself, had come to die, not to fight! Like two warriors of old they had flung aside their shields and each was waiting for the other to drive a lance into his unprotected chest!

Jesse holstered his guns and turned away, tears streaming unashamedly down his cheeks. Now he could saddle his horse and start down those aimless trails. Now he had paid his debt to Caleb, and he could leave with a mind free of everything except his memories.

Back in his office, he hurriedly threw his belongings into a blanket and rolled them up. He tied the ends together and swept the room with a last glance to make sure he had forgotten nothing.

AN EMBARRASSED cough at the door startled him. He turned. Caleb, looking very sheepish, stood just inside the jamb.

"You goin' somewhere?" he asked.

"Yeah. I don't know just where, yet. I'll drift around for a while."

Jesse threw the blanket roll over his shoulder and started for the door, but he found Caleb in his path.

"Jess, I've been a damn fool!"

Jesse shrugged. "If I'd been in your place, I'd probably acted a hell of a lot worse than you did."

"No, I want to explain," Caleb went on. "When my wife died she left me Clay, and he became very precious to me. I made up my mind that he would have everything I never had and I gave it to him. Everyone tried to tell me I was spoiling him, but I wouldn't listen. As the years went by, I think now that even I knew he was spoiled bad; but he was my son and I wouldn't admit even to myself that he was bad.

"Then he got killed. I don't hold it against you, Jess, because you just pulled the trigger. *I* killed him by bringing him up the way I did!"

Emotion choked Caleb and he stopped talking. Jesse realized what his pardner was going through and his heart went out to the rancher. He put his hand commiseratingly on his shoulder.

"Jess," Caleb looked into his eyes, "don't go! I need your help to get over this now, more than I ever did."

Jesse felt a sudden warm glow kindle inside him. "Pard," he said, emotion thickening his voice, "if you want my help, I'll stay till the sun quits coming up!"

Caleb smiled his appreciation, and Jesse felt very good. He threw down his blanket roll.

"Come on, he said, grinning. "Let's go wake the cook and get some breakfast.

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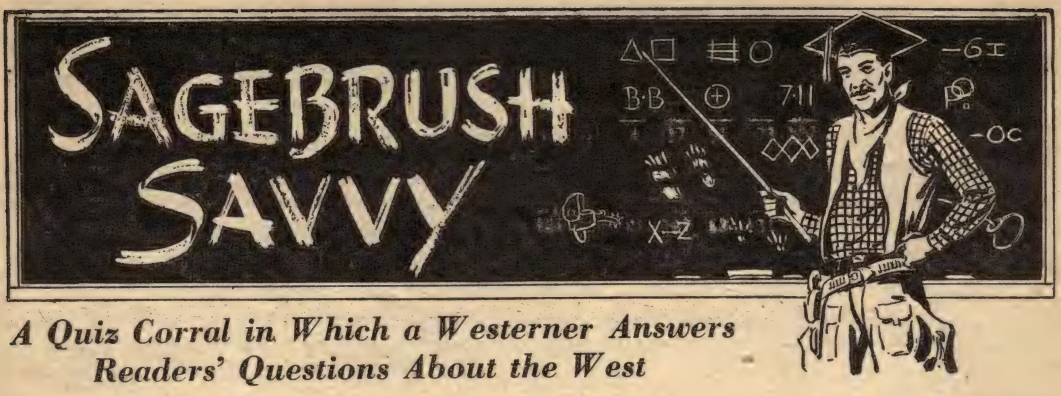

A Quiz Corral in Which a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—I've heard there is ice in the Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico that never melts, even when the summers get pretty hot. How come? —H.B.N. (Conn.).

A.—There is no ice in Carlsbad Caverns, but their temperature does stay at about 50 degrees, winter and summer. However, there are perpetual ice caves in pretty hot lava country in New Mexico, California and Oregon. I don't know how the ice got there nor what keeps it from melting, but it doesn't.

Q.—Were the trail bosses on old Texas cattle trails the owners of the longhorns they had charge of?—A.B.S. (Iowa).

A.—Sometimes owners or part owners drove their own cattle, but more often the trail bosses were working for wages. Many such "hired men on horseback," entrusted with cattle worth thousands of dollars, were young cowboys still in their twenties, but no hired men in history were ever more faithful to their trust.

Q.—Is El Paso, Texas, the original El Paso del Norte on the old Mexican trade route from Mexico City to Santa Fé?—F.W.E. (Calif.).

A.—Not quite. The original El Paso del Norte (Pass of the North) is Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, just across the Río Grande from the present El Paso, which was first called Magoffinsville and later Franklin before taking its present name.

Q.—Do Western Cowboys really say "podner" for "partner" like we hear so much kidding about on the radio?—Maggie T. (N.Y.).

A.—Many of the first Texas cowboys were southern born men who slurred or did not pronounce their "r's." Their saying "pahd-nuh" for "partner" is probably how "podner" got started. Cowboys with a Southern accent still say it that way, while most of the rest of us Westerners say "pardner"—even when we've had schoolin' enough to know it should be "partner."

Q.—Is there really a place called Deaf Smith in Texas?—Smitty (Ohio).

A.—Not a town but a county, named after a famous Texas Ranger and hero of the Texans fighting with Mexico.

Q.—What kind of a flower is the sego lily? —V.B. (Ind.).

A.—The sego lily, also called mariposa (butterfly) lily looks very much like a tulip except that its petals are thinner and its stalk more slender and pliant. Its commonest color is a pale lemon-yellow, often tinted with lavender, with brownish stamen and pistil, but this color varies to a bright copper hue in some sections. It is the state flower of Utah but also grows in many other Western states, both in high mountains and on dry, semi-desert plains.

Q.—A friend says that javelinas or peccaries are just tame pigs gone wild, but I claim they are a separate species of their own. Who is right?

A.—You are. The *javelina* (hah-vay-LEE-nah) belongs to the swine family but is a separate species native to the southwestern United States, Mexico and parts of Central and South America. Incidentally it is a rough and downright dangerous critter to hunt.

—*S. Omar Barker*

HAUNTED

CHAPTER I

Haunting Memories

I COULD hear him moving about in the next room. He always did like noisy spurs and wore them, whether he was out riding or here in the house. I believe he took them off only when he went to bed. And it seemed to me that his great, secret delight was to move endlessly around, with his short, jerky strides making the rowels tinkle and the chains jingle, the whole of it a squeaking, faintly shrieking, funereal sound.

I know I was jittery. The thing was there strong in my mind again and I couldn't get it out and all I knew was the evil persistence of it and that monotonous, unending mourning of his spurs. Crushing out my cigarette, I sat up in bed and put my booted feet on the floor. I lifted my hand to the black beard stubble on my face and found it wet with the sweat coursing down my cheeks.

The prodding restlessness came over me. I sat there a while, face in my hands, fighting it, but, as usual of late, I didn't fight it very long. His spurs went on sounding their lamenting song and the restlessness changed to a wild, throat-clogging panic and before I knew it, I'd belted on my gun and slapped my stetson on my head and was going out the door.

The first real awareness I had was his voice behind me. I was going down the steps from the house to the ranch yard when he spoke. I thought it strange that I had not heard him following me for his spurs had been sounding, and now it came to me that the strangeness I felt was the dead, almost empty silence as he stood there unmoving, his spurs unaccustomedly still.

"Going out, Joey?" he asked.

I stopped. I wanted to turn but I held

The one girl who never lost faith

in Joey Gilbert makes him remember

a thing dangerous to remember

SPURS

a novelet by H. A. DeROSSO

myself from doing so. I kept staring at the ground.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm going in to town. Any objections, Emmett?"

"No," he murmured slowly. Without turning, I could picture Emmett Squires lifting that delicate hand to his chin and rubbing it with his thumb. His large eyes would be round and sad and a compassionate little smile would keep tugging at his fine mouth. That is why I did not want to face him.

"You're of age now, Joey. I no longer have any legal claim over you. You're Joey Gilbert. The Bar G is yours. I used to be your guardian but you're grown up now and if I had any objections, they wouldn't be much good, would they, Joey?"

I didn't know if I should feel angry or ashamed. It was all there mixed up inside me. The resentment and that other thing —that long, never-ending remembrance.

"I'm getting fed up with your preaching, Emmett," I said, the irritation needling me like a thorn. "I've listened to it for years. One of these days I'm going to make you understand I won't take any more of it."

His sigh was as soft as the fluttering of a cottonwood leaf. "I'm only doing it for your own good, Joey, boy."

"You've been doing it for my good for years," I flared. "Has it brought any results?"

He must have moved for I heard his spurs jingle, a single, whining squeak, and then that heavy, strange silence filled in again. His voice, when it came, was unctuous and sad.

"How can I make you understand, Joey? You've been brooding again, haven't you? You've been thinking about it. You're always thinking about it. It's no good for you. It makes you drink and brawl and be ugly to every one. You shouldn't think about it all the time."

I could feel that cold, clammy sweat running down my cheeks again. The iciness was there crawling up and down the back of my neck. It was there hot and torturing in my mind and I had to grit my teeth at the memory of it.

"Maybe if you didn't keep on mentioning it to me, I could forget it, Emmett," I said through my teeth. "Maybe if you didn't keep throwing it at me, I'd start to forget a little."

"Throwing it at you! Me!" he said in a horrified, hurt tone. "I only mention it to you to try to straighten you out, Joey. You know you've been getting worse about it right along. You brood about it more and more as time goes by. It was a long time ago. It should have been forgotten by now. I keep bringing it up because I see you're letting it get too strong a grip on you. Haven't I treated you right, Joey? Haven't I raised you up like my own son? I've tried to be a father to you for ten years, Joey. You're like my own son to me. I—I just can't stand by idly and watch you go on like this!"

The shame got me good now. He hadn't had too pleasant a time with me. I'd given him his share of grief. I'd helled around plenty, trying to shake those evil memories, and all I'd succeeded in doing was bringing hurt to him. Slowly, I turned to face him, and I couldn't keep my eyes up, only down low on the ornate silverwork on his fancy Mexican spurs.

"I'm sorry, Emmett," I mumbled.

I could hear the smile in his voice. "That's all right, Joey. I understand, boy. Go on into town. Only try to take it a little easy, won't you? Just a little easy? . . ."

I DIDN'T go to town. I went to Buck Stroner's instead. I guess I had it in my mind to go there right along only I tried fooling myself like I'd done many times before—and always wound up at Stroner's.

His place lay in a small hollow among the barren sand hills. It was an empty, lonely, melancholy country with the wind moving restlessly and mournfully over the land and the red hills lying there in dead uselessness.

Maybe because it was so solitary and alone I liked it so much. Maybe it was because while I was there I felt a kinship

with its haunting desolation and ugly destitution. And then, Buck Stroner's moonshine worked quicker than the whisky sold in the bars.

It was about the time that the pleasant, glowing fog was flirting with my mind and the mellowing warmth lay there like a solid lump in my stomach that I saw the rider coming over the rise and down the slope toward the three mud huts that made up Stroner's.

I had just stepped outside a moment to get away from the dank, fetid smell of the inside and when I saw who the rider was I stayed right there, waiting, a bit of ugly premonition moving through me. He reined in his grulla mare about ten feet from me and sat a while in the kak, looking steadily at me. I gave him the eye right back and when he had enough of staring at me, he swung slowly down from the saddle.

He paused while he gave a hitch to his trouser belt and then he came toward me with his rolling, bow-legged walk, his head ducked down a little while he watched me out of upraised eyes. I saw the anger swirling in them. The reason for it was clear in my mind for it wasn't the first time like this with Dave Livingston and probably wouldn't be the last—until some day I killed him or he killed me. That brought a silent, roilng curse to my mind.

He stopped when he was close enough to touch me. At first, I thought it was only my breath but now I noticed that he had been drinking, too. That was what made his small yellow eyes glitter so brightly.

We were of a size, an inch over six feet. He maybe outweighed me by twenty pounds for his shoulders were wider and his hips thicker while I ran entirely to skinny boniness. He was in his middle thirties whle I had just turned twenty-two.

He fancied purple silk shirts and was wearing one now. His pearl-gray stetson must have set him back a month's wages. He had a rather handsome face if you didn't give too much attention to his nose that was pushed slightly to one side. Always about him there was the strong smell of cologne water and it was this, I guess, that had killed the whisky smell on his breath at first.

"You got a hard head on you, Joey?" he began in his snarling, nasal twang. "Takes quite a while for you to catch on to something, don't it, kid? It's got to be pounded right through that thick skull of yours before you understand it. Isn't that right, Joey?"

That ugly anticipation had started stirring in me. It was always like this. Anything to come up that would take that old remembrance away, even for a second, anything to wipe it away for a while.

"What is it this time, Dave?" I asked. My fists were itching to clench.

He hooked his thumbs in his belt and looked me up and down with a sneering arogance. "I've warned you about Margot. Don't say I haven't, kid. I don't know how many times I've told you to quit playing around with her. Looks like words are no good with you, Joey."

"What has she told you now?"

Dave's face had flamed to a violent, apoplectic flush. "The way she talks she even seems to like it." He pounded his chest. "She's my girl. No man's making a fool out of me over my girl. You hear me, kid?"

He could hear the disgust in my voice. "I haven't seen Margot in two weeks, Dave. When are you going to see through her lies?"

His voice took on a hushed, cruel tone. "You shouldn't have said that, Joey," he said softly—too softly. "You shouldn't have said that about Margot."

I COULD see the futility of words. He had it too strong in him. That twisted, needling jealousy was too much for him. He could never see it in a sober, rational way.

He had worked for the Bar G ever since Emmett Squires had taken it over for me and then Margot LeClerc came between me and Dave Livingston and rather than argue with him all the time, I had given him his time. Now that lay between us

on top of all the rest.

My disgust gave way to a driving hellishness. "Is that all you can do, Dave? Talk? All the time talk?"

The words came out of him in a low, fierce growl. "I'll show you what I can do."

He swung a looping, lashing arm. I saw it coming. I waited for it, then ducked under it, coming up close to him, smashing a fist into his middle. The breath whooshed out of him in a ragged gasp and he went staggering back. I followed right on top of him.

He swung that wild arm again, his face twisted in a ferocious, snarling grimace. This time I waited a moment too long and I started to duck his fist got me along the side of my head. The pain left me dazed. My feet got twisted up and in each other's way and before I knew it the ground was rushing up to hit my cheek.

Swiftly, I rolled over on my back, trying to shake the blinding pain out of my eyes. Through the red haze, I could see him coming at me, the sharp heels of his boots aimed at my face. A hoarse cry of panic tore out of my throat. Smashing up with both my fists, I deflected that lunge just in time, but not before one of his spurs cut a stinging gash along my cheek.

Up to now, it had just been the primal lust for battle, nothing more. Now the hot, vicious anger came piling down on me, filling my brain with a red, unreasoning rage.

He had gone sliding along the sand and was just now starting to scramble to his feet. I reached out, catching one of his boots. I jerked hard. He gave a harsh, startled cry and then he went toppling to the ground. I was on my knees beside him.

I hit him in the mouth as he lay on the ground. He gave a choked curse of pain. With his elbows he started to push himself up and I hit him again. He went smashing back on the sand, raising a small dust cloud about his shoulders.

This time he covered his face with his hands as he started to rise. I smashed both fists into his stomach. He turned green with the pain of it and dropped his hands away from his gasping, retching face. I hit him in the mouth again.

"So you'd stomp me, would you?" I was sobbing through clenched teeth. "So you'd use your boots on me, would you? How do you like this, Dave? And this? And this?"

He lay moaning on his back, his head rocking from side to side under my blows. There was no more fight in him, just a supine limpness in his lank body. Gradually, the sanity worked back into me and I sank back on my haunches, breathing heavily, just beginning to feel of the burning pain in my knuckles.

I got up on my feet and went over and leaned against the wall of one of the huts. Dimly, I was aware that Buck Stroner stood in his doorway, mutely watching.

After a while, Livingston struggled up on his feet. He stood unsteadily for a moment, dabbing at his cut and bleeding face with a purple shirt sleeve, making hoarse sounds of pain. He staggered over to his grulla mare and when he had hold of a stirrup he turned abruptly and faced me. I did not miss the lethal menace in his tone.

"This doesn't finish it, Joey, kid. This doesn't finish it a-tall. . . ."

CHAPTER II

Death in the Cantina

PAT DELMAS found me as I was riding aimlessly among the sterile sand hills. She took me in tow and brought me to her place that lay on a long, narrow, wind-swept mesa. The grass bowed sullenly to the force of the wind and the leaves of the cottonwood trees planted for shade around the buildings whispered their insistent little secrets.

I must have slept for I opened my eyes and in my ears there was the faint, mourning soughing of the wind and the sibi-

lant chattering of the cottonwood leaves and the soft, oppressive warmth of the room.

She must have heard me stirring for the door opened almost instantly and Pat Delmas came in. The room was half in shadow and she stood in the dimness beside the door, out of the reach of the sharp lance of sunlight piercing through the window.

She was a tall girl of about twenty. The long, blue-black hair drawn in a severe knot on the back of her neck showed a touch of Indian ancestry, as did the prominent cheekbones beneath the hollows of her large, soft eyes. Her skin, darkened by the sun, was the hue of old leather. Her mouth held the color of the ocotillo blossom in bloom.

She was wearing a white cotton blouse that was low enough to reveal the first faint rise of her breasts and a divided riding skirt with a fringed hem and small, white-stitched riding boots.

She stood there silently, watching me, and a vast flood of shame came crawling down over me. My head pounded and my eyes hurt and there seemed to be sand in my throat. All this would not have hurt half as much if Pat hadn't been there to see it.

I ran my hands over the beard stubble on my face and it was then that I felt the cloth patch on my cheek. She must have put it there over the cut I'd got in the fight with Dave Livingston. The shame became even stronger in me now.

I glanced at her but my eyes wouldn't hold and I buried my face in my hands again. "Why don't you leave me alone?" I said to her. "Why do you have to keep on picking me up and patching me up all the time?"

I COULD hear the whisper of her coming toward me. The warm scent of her was there beside me, sitting close to me, and then her cool hands touched mine.

"Why won't you tell me what it is, Joey?" she said in her deep, throaty voice. "Maybe if you told someone it would help."

I couldn't stand the touch of her on my hands. I got up and went over to the window and looked out among the tittering cottonwoods and the long, flat stretch of the mesa.

"There you go bringing it up again," I said to her. "Why don't you forget about it for once?"

"You're the one who should forget about it."

"Yeah," I said bitterly. "Forget. That's a pretty easy word to say."

I glanced at her. She was sitting with her hands folded limply in her lap, her head bowed. "I just want to help you, Joey. You know that. I want to see you happy. I want to hear you laugh. Won't you let me help you do that, Joey?"

"Do I have to tell you all over again?" I said angrily. "You know I don't like to talk about it. Why do you keep chasing after me? You know what I am. I'll never stop helling around. You want a man that will settle down and help you raise a big bunch of kids. I'm no good for that, Pat. Can't you find someone else?"

"I don't want someone else." There was a slight catch in her voice. I looked at her again and her head was bowed still more, only the tip of her nose and chin showing. "I don't even want you if that's what you're afraid of. I won't tie you down if that's what scares you. I just want to see you straightened out, Joey. That's all."

"I'm as straightened out as I'll ever care to be," I growled, turning to look out the window again.

She came over beside me. Her fingers, where they clutched my arm, dug in until I could feel her nails. Looking at her, I saw the tight, determined line of her mouth, the purposeful, almost angry glitter in her eyes.

"You're going to listen to me, Joey," she said tightly. "You're going to hear me out. You're going to tell me what I want to know. Tell me what's on your mind, Joey. Tell me what it is that drives you the way it does. It has to do with your parents, doesn't it, Joey?"

That was all I needed. It had been there, plaguing the back of my mind, and

now, with her words, the whole searing, shattering memory was before me. I could feel the cold sweat channeling down the back of my neck.

"That's what it is, isn't it, Joey?" Pat was asking. "You were all right until your father and mother were killed ten years ago. Everybody says so. You've taken their deaths too hard. It's just one of those things. You shouldn't let it dig at you the way it has. I know it was awful, seeing them killed before your eyes, but that's all over now. That's all in the past, Joey."

My face was drenched with sweat; it was pouring off my chin. My breath choked in my throat. My brain ached with the evil remembrance of it. Again I felt the sharp pain and the agony of it.

I swept her away from me. She went staggering across the room and fell across the bed. She struggled up on her elbows, her face lifted up to me, her eyes wide and frightened.

"So?" I shouted at her, the loudness of my voice hurting my throat. "You know all about it, don't you? Everybody knows all about it. They know why I drink. They know why I brawl. They know why I'm a no-good bum. I'm the only one that knows what happened that night. Only me. You hear me, Pat? Only I know what happened that night. I'm the only one that knows why I drink and brawl. Is that good enough for you? You can snoop all you want but this is all you'll ever get out of me. Do you hear, Pat?. . ."

THE trail winds down from the barren red hills and then straightens out as it cuts across the flat, level ground toward the town of Sandimas. I had just come out of the hills and was riding along the trail where it passed alongside the right bank of Sandimas Creek when I ran into Margot LeClerc.

I was not aware of her at first. Cottonwoods grew in pale, whispering profusion along the creek and the trail cut through the trees, making a solemn, shade-patched lane. The first I knew of Margot's presence was the sudden clatter of hoofbeats behind me and then her hail.

Reining my sorrel around, I waited for her. She came up on her Arabian gelding that was all sleeked up and polished until he shone like raw gold. She was riding side-saddle, her legs curved demurely beneath the long black skirt of her riding habit. A fluffy bit of white lace showed at her throat and on her shining, blonde hair she wore a small black hat. Above her, she was holding a dainty little blue parasol.

She was attractive enough, even beautiful, I guess. She took an almost fetish-like care of her skin and it was always pale and creamy, untouched by either the wind or the sun. Her eyes were rather small but a deep, azure blue and set wide apart in her face. Her rather short nose had an impudent tilt to the tip. Her mouth was small and well-shaped and she had touched it up a little with rouge.

She was breathing a little fast from her exertions as she reined in the Arabian. "Hello," she said in a light, breathless voice.

It had been three days since my fight with Dave Livingston but the memory of it still lived with a grating vividness in my mind. Seeing her like ths, made the remembrance doubly strong. I felt my hand lifting unconsciously toward the livid scar on my cheek.

"I'm kind of glad I've run into you, Margot," I said slowly.

She flashed a white, dazzling smile. "How nice to hear you say that, Joey. You know, you practically never say sweet things to me."

The distaste was there very bitter in my mouth. "I didn't mean it as a compliment," I said. I touched the scar on my cheek again. "I suppose you heard about me and Dave and our friendly little wrestling match?"

A frown clouded her face. "How awful," she whispered. She lifted intense, brooding eyes to me. "Dave is so unbearably jealous. I've tried to make it clear to him time and again that I'm through with him but he won't have it that way. Did he hurt you much, Joey?"

The anger swept me uncontrollably. "Damn your polite excuses, Margot," I

shouted. "You know I've got no use for you. Why do you keep egging Dave on? Why do you keep on telling him it's me for you?"

"But that's the truth, Joey," she said, lower lip beginnng to tremble. "Why can't you be nice to me? I can't help it if I feel that way about you."

I reached out, grasping her arm, squeezing until she winced with pain. "Look, Margot," I said, that cold anger moving stormily through me, "this business of you and Dave and me is going to come to no good end. How have you got this thing tallied? What's in that pretty blonde head of yours, Margot? Why do you keep throwing yourself at me? Is it because Bar G is the biggest spread in these parts?"

"Joey!" she cried in a hurt tone. "How can you say such things, Joey?"

"I'm just wondering," I said. "There's a lot that I'd like to understand about you, Margot. Once it used to be Emmett Squires with you but then I came of age and Bar G belonged to me. Then you switched to Dave Livingston. All at once you ditched him and started throwing yourself at me. Why? I've never encouraged you, have I? I've never wanted anything to do with you. Why have you been carrying on like this, Margot? Why?. . ."

"Did you get that message? He's burned his blanket!"

THE cantina of Arnolfo was a small, grubby, out-of-the way place in Sandimas. A small plank bar stood at one side of its low-ceilinged room and a couple of tables and chairs along the opposite wall. I liked the place for its seclusion and air of brooding solitude. It was nice to come here of a dull, dreary afternoon and lean over the bar by myself with a bottle of Arnolfo's tequila in front of me to drink as I wished.

Arnolfo sat snoring gently at the end of the bar. He was a short man with a prodigious paunch that rose and fell mightily with his breathing. Dirty, uncombed gray hair matted the top of his round head and a fringe of dirty, greasy whiskers ringed his cheeks and lips.

Even through his slumber he heard the other entering the cantina before I did. Arnolfo's breath choked in the middle of a snore and his eyes batted open and he was instantly awake, jumping to his feet behind the bar. The other came into the place with a slow deliberateness, his spurs sounding mournfully, and he moved on down to the other end of the bar opposite Arnolfo. I looked up then and saw that it was Dave Livingston.

A chill wave of premonition passed through me. A cold knot clogged my throat for a moment and then was gone, leaving a sort of savage exhilaration tingling in me.

"Ah, Señor Livingston," said Arnolfo, washing his hands. *"¿Como le va¿"*

Muy bueno," said Livingston. "A slug of tequila, Arnolfo."

"Si, si, tequila," said Arnolfo, as if that wasn't the only liquor he sold.

Livingston downed his drink and smacked his lips loudly. He leaned an elbow on the bar and faced toward me.

"I just saw Margot, Joey," he said in a slow, languid way that I didn't like at all. "She told me about you and her meeting on the trail to town."

"Yes, Dave?"

"She told me you pestered her, Joey. You know I don't like that. I've told you that several times but like I've said you've got a hard head and it takes a while for it to sink in."

My hand was fingering that scar on my cheek. I looked at Livingston's face It

still showed the marks and bruises I'd put on it. The anger was stirring in me again.

"Have you come to get your face decorated again, Dave?"

He spat a curse and slapped his hand down loudly on the bar. Arnolfo jumped and then reached hurriedly for the tequila bottle.

"Tequila, Señor Livingston?" said Arnolfo, pouring. "I, Arnolfo, am buying. Drink, señor. On the cantina of Arnolfo." He came waddling down the bar to me. "The cantina of Arnolfo is buying, Señor Joey. Here, drink your tequila. Drink and let's all be brothers, señores."

Livingston had straightened. A dark flush lay over his face. I caught the unreasoning madness in his eyes and suddenly I knew how this meeting would turn out and the knowledge left me momentarily cold and sick inside.

"No, Joey, kid," said Livingston with studied deliberateness, "it won't be fists this time. Nothing as indefinite as fists. It's going to be settled once and for all this time."

"Please, señores," said Arnolfo, wringing his hands, "we are all brothers, no? We are all amigos, no? Would you like more tequila?" He reached under the bar, came up with two sealed bottles. "Here, señores, with the compliments of Arnolfo. One bottle for you, Señor Livingston. The other bottle for you, Señor Joey. Take them and go with the blessings of Arnolfo."

"Damn your tequila," snarled Livingston. "Drink it yourself."

HE STARTED moving down the bar toward me. I stepped away from it, letting my sleeve brush against the black handle of my Colt .44, my eyes never leaving Livingston. He came slowly with his right hand fingering the edge of the bar not far above the cedar butt of his Remington .44-40.

"Señores, please," Arnolfo was pleading. "Not here. Not in the cantina of Arnolfo. I am a peaceful man. I am a brother to everyone. I love the whole world. Please, not here señores. I beg it of you. Not here. Not in my beautiful cantina."

I knew it was no use but I wanted to try anyhow. I said, "Look, Dave. Take it easy, won't you? She isn't worth fighting over. You're just blind about her. Why don't you wait and cool off and maybe you'll see it as it really is."

"Yellow, Joey?" he sneered.

We'd have pulled then only Arnolfo had stepped between us. He was holding two bottles out to us. "Here, señores," he was saying. "Take this. Not tequila. This is good Americano drink. A whisky salesman from El Paso sold them to me. Scotch, señores! Beautiful, delectable Scotch! Always I have saved them for the day that some *gente fina* would stop in the cantina of Arnolfo and then I, Arnolfo, could show them that I have a quality drink in my cantina and not only tequila. But here, señores, the Scotch is yours. Take it and go and we are all brothers. You will take this beauitful Scotch, no?"

"Damn you and your Scotch," shouted Livingston, smashing out with his left arm. Arnolfo squealed and went sprawling. I heard the shatter of breaking glass and then all I knew was the sudden, swift dip of Livingston's right hand.

I have only a vague recollection of the immediate seconds. I know the .44 bucked and roared in my hand and then Livingston was screaming and clawing his chest and the next thing I remember is standing there, horror-stricken, gazing down at his dead body.

How long I stood there I do not know. The first sounds I remember is the heartbroken sobbing of Arnolfo. He was kneeling there on the dirt floor, fingering the wet, shattered fragments of his two bottles of Scotch.

"My Scotch, my Scotch," he wailed.

I guess my face was drawn and gray about the mouth. My stomach was fluttering around inside me. Holstering my .44, I turned to Arnolfo.

"You saw it, Arnolfo," I said. "You saw him pull first. He started it. You'll swear to that, won't you, Arnolfo?"

He held up his hands, full of dripping, broken glass, to me. The tears coursed

down his rotund cheeks. "My Scotch," he sobbed. "The bottles are broken and my Scotch is spilled on the floor. All my life I have dreamed of the day that some *gente fina* would come to my cantina. These swells would sit at one of my tables and they would say to me, 'Arnolfo, we wish to drink. Not that vile tequila but a drink worthy of *muy finos caballeros*.' Then I, Arnolfo, would proudly serve them this delightful Scotch. But now, look, señor. Look at my beautiful Scotch spilled on the floor."

"Arnolfo," I said, leaning down and shaking his shoulder. "You saw the Señor Livingston pull first, didn't you? You will swear to that when they ask you, won't you, Arnolfo?"

"My Scotch," he wailed. "All ruined. My delicious, treasured Scotch."

"Arnolfo," I tried again but saw it was quite hopeless. I straightened, very careful to keep my eyes off the prone body of Dave Livingston, and went out of the cantina. Behind me, I could hear Arnolfo, piteously sobbing.

"My Scotch, my Scotch. My poor, delectable Scotch. . . ."

CHAPTER III

The Veil Is Lifted

PAT DELMAS found me again at Buck Stroner's. Somehow, through all that baffling, befuddling liquor haze, the message of her urgency worked through my brain and I left wtih her. We rode up to her mesa and there the cold, unending sweep of the wind began to clear my mind. By the time we got to her home I was quite sober.

She filled me with scalding black coffee. Then she squatted on her toes in front of me as I sat in the big wicker-bottomed chair, staring up at me with a tight, intense look in her dark face.

"Do you know what you're in for, Joey?" she asked at long last.

"It was self-defense," I growled, putting a hand up in front of my eyes to see if that would help to keep the awful, searing memory away. "He pulled first. Arnolfo can testify to that."

"They've sworn out a warrant against you, Joey," she said quietly.

"Why don't they talk to Arnolfo? I've got nothing to worry about. Arnolfo will prove it was a fair fight and that Dave started it."

She put her hand up on mine. I could feel the bitter coldness of her fingers and the tenseness in them. "Please believe me when I say that I love you, Joey. Please believe that I want to help you." She paused, then went on in a tight, strained way. "The warrant has nothing to do with Dave Livingston. It's for the—murder of your parents."

I sat up straight in the chair. For a moment I could see nothing but the hated, tormenting, horrible vision. My throat choked and went suddenly dry. Dimly, I was aware that Pat had risen to her feet, hovering over me.

"How would they know?" I gasped.

"Emmett Squires swore out the warrant," she said. "He says he's doing it for your own good, that you're a homicidal killer and should be put away—now that you've killed again."

I buried my face in my hands. I guess that sound that came out of me was an aching sob. Then all my running away from it had been of no avail. The years of trying to hide from it had been of no use. Now it was known. Now everybody knew.

I could feel her fingers in my hair. She was stroking my head. "Something is wrong there, Joey. I don't care what anyone says. I know you didn't kill your parents."

I tried to give a jeering laugh but it became all mixed up with the sobs jerking out of me. "Yeah, you know," I said. "I suppose you know better than me. I remember the gun in my hand. I remember it bucking against my palm. I remember killing them. But you know better than that, don't you, Pat?"

Her fingers dug into my arms. She

pushed me back in the chair. She put her face there close to mine. She shook me.

"You didn't do it, Joey. I know it because I love you. I know you couldn't have killed them. You've tried to forget it so much you've got it all mixed up in your mind. Remember all of it, Joey, all of it!"

"What more do you want!" I cried. "I remember the gun in my hand. I remember shooting at them!"

"Why, Joey? Why did you shoot at them?"

"I don't know. I killed them. That's all I know."

"Were you alone, Joey?"

"I don't know, Pat. For God's sake, leave me alone."

She pushed harder on my arms. Her voice was cold, relentless. "Squires must have been there if he knew about it. Don't you remember him?"

"I remember killing them. That's all I remember."

"Think, Joey. How did it happen? Think of all that happened that night, Joey."

"Go away, Pat," I moaned. "Don't talk about it any more. I've spent ten years trying to forget it. Why do you want me to keep on remembering it?"

"You've got to remember it, Joey—all of it. Because I know somehow you didn't do it. Remember everything that you can about it. Was there a fight or a struggle of some kind?"

"I don't know. I think I was mad. I remember shooting the gun. I remember shooting at them. They were on the floor."

"Were you fighting over something? Was a struggle going on?"

"I don't know. I just shot the gun. That's all I remember. There was a lot of noise in my head. That's all I remember."

I tried pushing her away from me but her grip was like iron. Her voice kept pounding at me, demanding, insistent. "What kind of noise, Joey? Think hard, Joey."

"I hate that noise. I don't know what it was. I only know I killed them."

"What made that noise, Joey? What did it sound like?"

"It was squeaking. All the time squeaking and shrieking."

"What made it, Joey? Think hard. What made the squeaking and shrieking?"

I can't tell exactly how it was. Something like a big black wall moving suddenly and inexplicably aside. Opening on a room that was once dark and filled with unearthly horrors and now with the blackness removed from it, the room lay there clear and unalterably bright.

Pat's face was there close to mine, her eyes wet with tears, her mouth grim and purposeful.

"What made that noise, Joey?"

"His spurs!. . ."

AS I came into the living room, I could see the back of Emmett Squires's head above the back of the cushioned easy chair. There was a thin film of tobacco smoke eddying about his face and the richness of its aroma struck my nostrils.

I was moving very quietly and he did not hear me until I halted behind the chair and said softly, "Hello, Emmett."

He started, then twisted suddenly around, spurs protesting shrilly, regarding me over the top of the chair with bewilderment widening his eyes. He sucked in his breath in a great, chest-swelling inhalation and let it out of him in a loud, lingering sigh.

Slowly, he got up on his feet and put on that small, self-effacing smile of his. "You startled me, Joey. Where have you been?"

"Oh, out and about," I said. I've been thinking about it again, Emmett."

He took the Havana cigar out of his mouth and let the indulgent sadness come to his eyes. "I'm sorry to hear that, Joey. You shouldn't think about it so much."

Some of that old anger started beating in the back of my head. "You've always made sure I wouldn't forget it, haven't you, Emmett? You always kept telling me not to think about it, knowing that your insistent harping on it would only make me remember it all the more. Well, Emmett, I've gone on remembering it. In fact, I've finally remembered all of it."

He began smoothing his yellow silk shirt

with his hand. His eyes hardened, then wavered, then shot back, keen and piercing, at me.

"I don't get you, Joey," he said. "You're all mixed up, lad."

"Should I tally it up for you?" I said bitterly. "I guess I will. You see, Emmett, I remember you putting that gun in my hand that night. I remember you shooting it off in my fingers. I think they were already dead. My mind was all fuzzy that night. I don't know what you did to me to make me like that. Everything is still hazy but I remember you from that night, Emmett."

He smiled somewhat archly. "I always knew that Stroner's moonshine would get you some time. You shouldn't have drunk so much of it, Joey."

The words shot through my teeth. "I'm cold sober for once, Emmett. I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm saying. In fact, I'll tell you what you've been trying to do ever since that night. You want Bar G, don't you? With me out of the way and you having been my guardian and having raised me like a son and all that rot, you could finagle your way into getting hold of it, couldn't you, Emmett?

"Is that why you swore out that warrant for my arrest? You were pretty positive that I wouldn't remember any more who really killed my parents. Is that why you got Margot LeClerc to work on Dave Livingston until I had to kill him? You wanted Dave out of the way, didn't you? Was he blackmailing you, Emmett? I always knew he had some hold on you. It was your idea to get Margot to play up to Dave and then switch over to me. You were pretty friendly with her until about a year ago. Isn't that right, Emmett?"

He waved an apologetic hand, the left hand. That diverted my eyes. His right hand had been stroking his shirt and now, suddenly, it dove beneath the cloth and came out with a pistol in its grip. The barrel centered on my chest. A cold grimace twisted Emmett's lips.

"You really know how to add two and two, don't you, Joey?" he said in a soft, dangerous tone. "Little good it will do you though. I've got you right where I want you. I'm sure by now that my story about you killing your parents will hold. Yes, after having killed Dave Livingston, I think the story will stand. I think it will stand, too, when I say you threatened my life and I had to shoot you in self-defense. You're a maniacal killer, don't you know?"

HE GAVE an ugly little titter. Through the anguish and anger burning in me, I said, "Why did you have to kill my father and mother? Just to get Bar G? What did you have against them?"

He tittered again. A mad, unholy light seemed to glow in his eyes. "Nothing like clearing up loose ends, eh, Joey? I like a neat, thorough job so I'll tell you. You see, I knew your mother back in Missouri. I wanted to marry her but she married your father instead. I swore I'd kill them both for that. They came out to the West. It took me fifteen years before I found them. I didn't kill them right away. Oh, no. I was too clever for that. I pretended it was all over with me. I became the best friend of the family so there would be no suspicion cast on me and to make it easy to be appointed your guardian."

He laughed again, eyes glittering evilly. "Maybe it was because I wanted Bar G. It is a juicy plum, Joey. I drugged you that night. I put the gun in your hand and fired it into the dead bodies of your father and mother. I gambled on that dazed impression being so horrible to you that you would remember nothing else. For ten years I was correct. The memory of it was so terrible and then the drug had so thickened your brain that you kept fighting the remembrance, trying to put it out of your mind, succeeding instead only to convince yourself that you had really killed your parents." A simpering smirk twisted his lips. "It was quite clever, if I say so myself."

"And Livingston?" I asked.

"He was in it with me. He never did like my taking over Bar G. He was quite difficult at times. You took care of him very nicely for me." His voice thinned. "I be-

lieve this clears up all your questions, Joey. Thanks for giving me the privilege of killing you, also. After all, you're their son. I've enjoyed every minute of the hell you went through, thinking you had killed them. I hate your dirty, crawling guts!"

His eyes distended, his mouth contorted into a savage, snarling grimace. I felt the coldness closing over the back of my neck and then the welcome voice came from just outside the window.

"Hold it, Squires! I've got you covered!"

Emmett jerked in surprise. The pistol wavered in his hand as his head whipped around toward the open window. That was all that I had been waiting for. I leaped ahead.

He saw me coming and cried out, lining up the pistol again, but I was on him. I knocked his wrist aside, and the gun sent its bullet into the floor. My fist caught him under the chin. I put all the strength I had into the blow. He went wildly back, flailing his arms, slamming up against the wall.

Before he could recover, I had reached him. Now I knew only the old, ravaging, blinding anger racing madly through me. I knew only the savage, familiar impulse to lash out at him. I don't know how many times I hit him. I was crying and screaming and smashing at his bloodied face, his hoarse, retching moans like music in my ears, and then the hands and fingers were tearing me off him.

I fought them but they got me into a chair and held me in it, both of them, Pat Delmas and Sheriff Luke Tunstall. Finally, the madness went out of my brain and I quieted and said, "I'm all right now. I'm all right. Did you hear him, Luke? Wasn't it like I told you it would be?"

"I heard him," said Tunstall, his wide, craggy face gray and mean. "You told me a wild story, Joey, but Squires verified it. He's one gent it's going to be a pleasure to hang!"

Reaction began to set in. My stomach was sick and floating around inside me. My fingers trembled. A sagging weakness persisted in my knees.

I looked up at Tunstall and Pat Delmas. "I could have killed him, couldn't I? I had the right to kill him but I didn't, did I? For ten years he kept telling me I was a homicidal killer. And then I went and killed Livingston. I could have killed Emmett, too, but I didn't. I'm not a killer, am I?"

I was looking at Pat. She saw the appeal in my face and she smiled through the tears in her eyes. "No, Joey, you're not a killer," she said quietly.

She held out her hand and I took it and she led me outside. We stood very close together there in the ranch yard. The wind came down upon us, somehow very clean and vibrant now, washing away all the old traces and fragments of memory. I pulled Pat still closer to me and put my cheek in her hair and for the first time in ten years knew a complete, pervading happiness. . . . .

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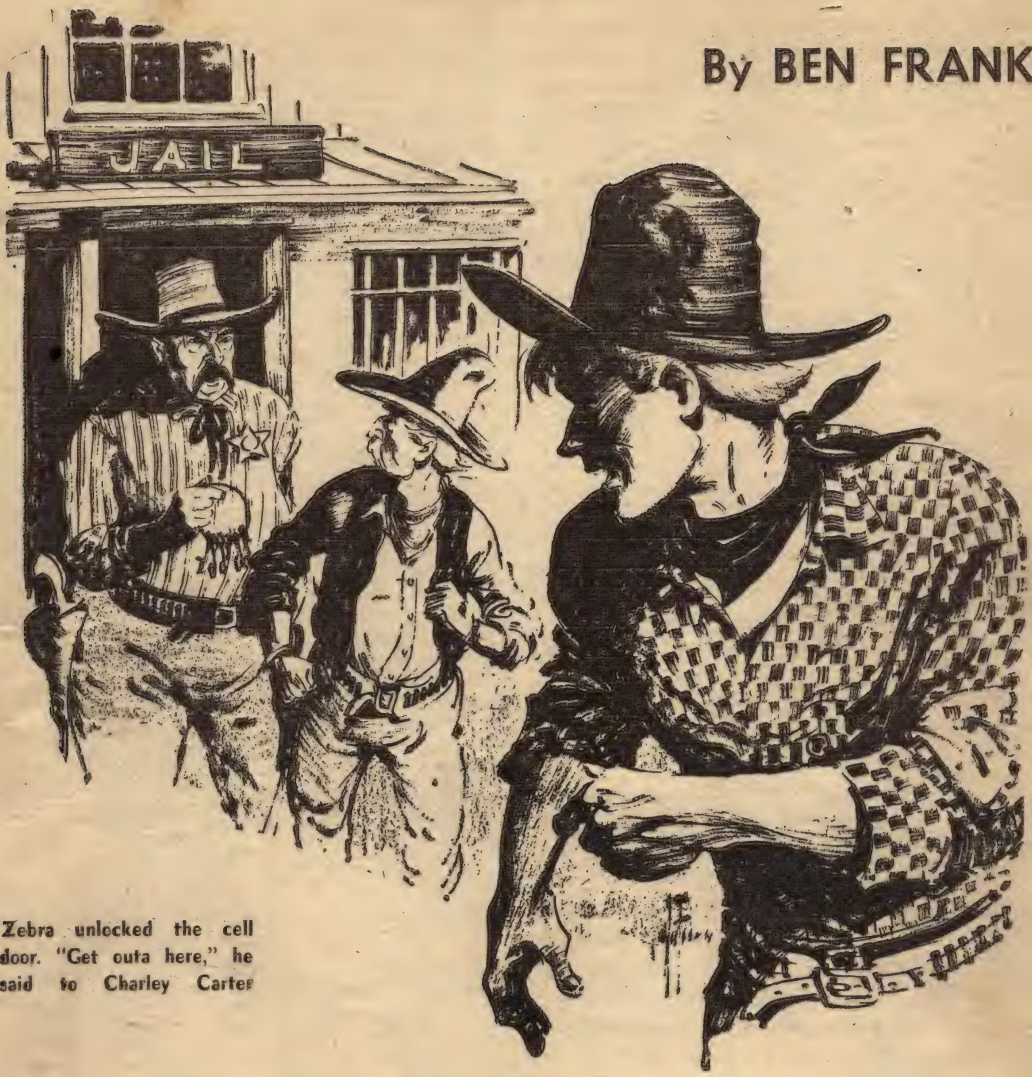

Zebra unlocked the cell door. "Get outa here," he said to Charley Carter

Every Dog Has His Day

—but Charley was beginning to think it only applied to the four-legged variety

DANGED if it ain't the truth," Charley Carter said to the Double M foreman. "Every dog does have his day!"

Now, if you want to know what made Charley say this to the foreman of the Double M, you got to go back to a certain Monday in August. On that day, Charley had his twenty-first birthday.

He was a long, lean cowboy, with a wide grin and a freckled face. For five

years, he'd been working his head off for his old tight-fisted Uncle Ham Mundy, owner of the Rocking M, and for some reason or other. Charley had an idea that his twenty-first birthday would make things some different. Not that he objected to working hard. But after all, he was the old maverick's only living relative, and when a young man comes of age, he naturally thinks —

Well, old Uncle Ham bit off a hunk of eating tobacco, gave his nephew a careful look and started off the day by saying, "You can celebrate by cleanin' out the horsebarn, son."

Charley's red hair kind of sizzled under his ten-gallon hat, while his mild blue eyes narrowed dangerously. But being no hand to say much, he didn't offer no arguments. He just straddled his bronc and rode away from the Rocking M, figuring he'd had all of Uncle Ham's bossing he ever wanted and that he would go to Africa, or someplace, and make a fresh start.

But he wasn't very happy about it. The honest truth is, he was kind of a home-loving boy, and deep in his heart, he felt a certain fondness for his Uncle Ham. Also, there was Millie McDuffee.

Lately, Millie had been looking with favor upon a young gent by the name of Gus Gordon. Not that Charley had any strings on Millie, but it kind of rubbed him the wrong way to see a slick stranger come here and grab off the prettiest girl in the county.

THE sun was a brassy furnace in the cloudless sky. It was so hot that morning that Sol Coots, Gil Grover, Ed Biggers and Sim Adams, members of the Cross-creek Spit-and-Whittle Club, quit their checker game in the barber shop and wandered around to the shady side of Jeff Fox's general store. This is where they were when Charley rode into town.

Charley tied his bronc in front of the bank, aiming to draw out his life's savings to take with him to Africa. But it was too early for the bank to be open, so Charley also wandered around to the shady side of the store. The four oldsters didn't pay no mind to a young squirt like him. They sat with their bony, bent backs against the building and continued to spit, whittle and sling the bull.

"Ain't no question about it," old Gil Grover was saying. "Sooner or later, a man runs up agin the all-important day of his life. The day that he can look back on and say, 'That's the day that started me out—made me rich."

Now, Gil Grover's words carried weight in Cross-creek. He was president of the bank, even if he hadn't been inside it for twenty years, and was richer than a tub-ful of whipped cream. Yes sir, when he said something, folks sat up and took notice.

"How's that, Gil?" Sol Coots said past his white whiskers.

Sol had retired from the ranching business fifteen years before with more money than he knew what to do with. His words carried weight, too.

"I was just past twenty-seven when my important day came along," Gil said, spitting gushily. "Walkin' down the street, flat busted, I looked up, and there was a hoss runnin' away with a girl. I stopped the hoss; saved the girl. She turned out to be the banker's daughter. Married her. That's how come I got to be a banker."

Frowning, Ed Biggers rubbed his pink bald head. Ed owned stock in a dozen railroads.

"By gum!" he exploded. "Come to think about it, I can pick out the day that made me. That day I drove my old team to town, aimin' to sell 'em and get outa the country. Feller runnin' the store then stops me an' sez, 'Ed, I'm movin' my stock across the street to the new building. How about you doin' the hauling?' "

Ed spat noisily. "First thing you know, I was in the freightin' business. Next thing you know, I was railroadin'."

Sol Coots nodded sagely. "Got my start one day in a poker game. Started with three dollars and won a dozen or so longhorns. Reckon if I hadn't got in that poker game, I'd never thought about going

into the ranchin' business."

"Funny thing," Sim Adams piped up. "Buyin' a pair of shoes started out the day that was a turning point in my life."

"How was that?" Sol wanted to know.

"Them blamed shoes was too tight. The longer I wore 'em, the madder I got. Along comes a big stranger and makes some crack about me bein' a runt. I was so mad I didn't stop to think. Tied into him and licked the daylights outa him. When he came to, said he would be proud to shake hands with the gent who had licked him. He turned out to be a prospector. We went into the minin' business together and struck it rich."

"Sun's creepin' around on us," Gil Grover observed.

The four oldsters groaned to their feet and moved on to find a shadier place. But not Charley Carter. He dropped down on his haunches to mull over what he had just heard. But before he got his brain in gear, he heard the clatter of hoofs on the hard ground. Glancing up, he saw Millie McDuffee riding her pinto up the street.

MILLIE was nineteen. She lived on the Bar M with her pa and ma. She was something to see in an open-throated shirt and a short riding skirt. Yellow hair, a small straight nose, a wide red mouth. She saw Charley sitting there, lifted a hand and smiled.

Charley waved back, but with no great enthusiasm. Although he and Millie were friends from way back, he wasn't the kind to show undue excitement over any girl. Even if it did kind of gall him to know that Millie was casting her smiles upon Gus Gordon.

He watched her halt in front of the post office and swing to the ground with a swish of skirts about her slim bare legs. He was on the verge of getting to his feet and crossing over to say hello when Gus Gordon came hurrying up to her.

This newcomer to Cross-creek claimed he was from near Denver and had come out here to find himself a ranch to buy. He was a handsome cuss with slick black hair, lily-white hands and plenty of money to throw around. Charley had him figured as a four-flusher, which was exactly what he was.

Presently, Millie and Gus walked from sight around the corner of a building. Shrugging, Charley settled back against the side of Jeff Fox's store and again began to mull over what the four wealthy old-timers had said.

He never doubted for a minute but what he had heard was the absolute truth. And figuring that he himself hadn't as yet met up with any one day that would make him rich or successful, it occurred to him that this was likely the day. His twenty-first birthday, wasn't it? Started out with breaking off with his Uncle Ham. Who knew, maybe today would be the turning point—

"If it ain't my old pal, Charley Carter!" a voice sang out and a big hand squashed his hat down over his eyes.

Prying the hat from his eyes, Charley gazed up into the brown, grinning face of Dusty Dunn. He and Dusty were the same age. They had fist-fought each other to a draw a number of times and had been the best of friends for years.

Dusty lowered himself into the shade. "What's new, chum?"

Charley repeated the oldsters' conversation. "I kind of got a hunch that this may be my big day," he finished.

"Every dog has his day, all right," Dusty said, grinning.

Charley scowled faintly. He didn't figure he was exactly no dog, although he had led a dog's life, off and on.

"Reminds me, one day my grandpa caught a fish that'd swallowed a dime," Dusty went on, grinning wider. "He took that dime and—"

"All right," Charley said darkly. "I got enough to worry me without listening to you run off at the mouth."

Whistling cheerfully, the bony cowboy rose and wandered on along the street, leaving Charley to himself.

CHARLEY tipped back his hat and let his eyes stray. No storekeeper was

moving from one building to another, so there didn't seem any chance of getting into the freighting business. Nobody at the bank had a daughter to rescue. There weren't any miners in Cross-creek to lick. Anyway, Charley's old boots didn't pinch his feet, and he couldn't think of a thing to aggravate him enough to lick anybody. Suddenly he had a let-down feeling. Like as not, this wasn't his red-letter day, after all.

But at that moment, Jeff Fox came around the corner of his store, pushing a loaded wheelbarrow. Jeff's round face was redder than a politician's herring, and he was puffing like a leaky steam engine.

"Got a ton of stuff to wheel up from the depot," he wheezed.

Charley felt a sudden tingle of excitement. Here was his chance to go into the freighting business and end up owning a string of railroads.

"How about hiring me to wheel up your stuff?" he asked.

Jeff snorted and shook his head. "I ain't helpless yet," he said, and went on his way.

Charley sighed dismally and sank down again in the shade. Then he saw Ace Allen, the Beefsteak Saloon gambler, cross the sun-blistered street and push past the batwings.

Now, Charley was no gambler. But anyway he looked at it, it would be nice to win a herd of cattle and get himself started in the ranching business. A search through his pockets revealed twenty-eight cents. A gent like Ace Allen wouldn't care to waste his time, playing poker with a cowboy who had but twenty-eight cents. Charley shoved to his feet and went into the bank. He checked out his life's savings—one hundred and fifty-three bucks—and stepped back out into the sun's brassy glare. He was still standing there, his mind not quite made up, when Millie came along.

"Hi, Chuck," she said, flashing him a smile.

Her hair was like gleaming gold in the sunlight and her blue eyes were dancing up at him full of the devil—well, Charley suddenly guessed maybe he didn't want to go to Africa, after all.

"See you and Gus Gordon are getting pretty thick," he said.

"Not jealous, are you?" she asked, dimpling.

"Me, jealous?" That was a good one. Charley liked to laughed himself hoarse. "Why would I be jealous?"

"Then what are you yelling your head off about?" Millie asked.

"Me, yelling?" Charley yelled. "You must be crazy!"

"A girl could do worse than pick herself up a wealthy young rancher like Gus," Millie said coolly.

She swung her golden head and went on down the street, as cute a little trick as you ever hope to lay eyes on.

"So she's wanting to pick up a rich young rancher," Charley said to himself, grinding his teeth. "Well, she'd have a heck of a time, picking me up, even if I owned a million cows!"

Scowling darkly, he crossed the street and went into the Beefsteak Saloon. He'd show that Millie McDuffee a thing or two.

THE PLACE was practically deserted at that time of day. Not more than a dozen gents around, counting Charley and Big Bo Benson, the barkeep. But Ace Allen sat at a green-topped table with a cigar between his thin lips. And across from him sat Gus Gordon, as handsome as a circus parade.

Face grim, Charley strode over to the table. "Wouldn't want to play a little poker, would you?" he said to Ace.

"Maybe," Ace said without much show of interest.

Charley sat down and put his roll on the table. Gus Gordon swallowed wrong and like to choked to death. Ace smiled thinly and began to shuffle the cards with his long, expert fingers.

"How much money you got there, Charley?" Ace asked casually.

"Enough to win myself a herd of steers," Charley told him without hesitation.

"Mind if I get in on the game?" Gus asked.

"Just as leave win your money as anybody's," Charley answered.

Gus produced a wad of bills. Ace counted out chips and put all the money into his pockets.

"Suckers," Charles said and picked up his first hand.

Gus won that pot. Ace won the second. It went on like that until Charley's chips were gone.

"Want to bet your horse and saddle?" Ace asked pleasantly.

Charley shoved back from the table. One thing he knew for sure, this wasn't his lucky day.

"No, thanks," he said sadly and headed for the batwings.

He had been so busy losing his money that he hadn't seen Dusty Dunn come in. So it came to him with quite a shock when Dusty hawed-hawed and said, "Every dog has his day, all right."

Ordinarily Charley was as peacable as any redhead. But after losing his money instead of winning a herd of cattle, he wasn't in no mood for taking a joke.

"That ain't funny!" he said furiously, and he hauled off and knocked Dusty halfway across the room.

Now, Dusty Dunn wasn't the kind to allow no redheaded cownurse to swat him, even if he was his best friend. He got to his feet, shook the cobwebs out of his head. Then he came back, swinging from his hips.

It turned out to be a rousing good fight. And before the barkeep and the few spectators got around to stopping it, a number of chairs, bottles and one large mirror got broken into little pieces. Big Bo Benson was fit to be tied.

"No redheaded hellion can come in here, start a fight and bust up a hundred dollars' worth of stuff without payin' for it,"" Big Bo yelled.

"I didn't start it," Charley declared, glaring at Dusty. He started it by saying, 'Every dog has his day.' So I—"

"Every dog has his day ain't fightin' words!" Big Bo cut in hotly. "I'd like to see you thrown in the jug till the damages was paid in full!"

"All right, all right!" Charley yelled. "So the whole thing was my fault, and any saddle bum can say every dog has his day till his tongue falls out! I don't care—and don't worry, I'll pay the damages."

He shook off the restraining hands and went storming out into the street. He couldn't remember the day when he'd been so downright aggravated.

THE SUN told him it was time to go put on the feedbag, but he'd lost his appetite. However, it didn't seem quite right to starve his bronc, so he led the animal to the livery barn and turned him over to Punchy Pratt, a kid whose ambition was to grow up into an outlaw.

By then, Charley had begun to cool off some. And with the cooling off came a feeling of remorse. He should have had better sense, he knew, than to play poker for keeps with a gambler of Ace Allen's caliber. And having a fight with Dusty was the dangest fool thing he had done for a long time—unless you'd consider eavesdropping on four rich old coyotes, who hadn't done an honest day's work in twenty years, and believing what they said.

Walking along the street, he kept an eye open for Dusty, with some idea of apologizing in the back of his mind. But Dusty wasn't to be seen anyplace. In fact, the street was deserted, for it was high noon. And more from force of habit than hunger, Charley went into Jeff Fox's store. He still had the twenty-eight cents, which would buy quite a few crackers.

Just as he'd finished eating, Jeff came in with another wheelbarrow loaded with boxes.

"Hotter'n a fire in a haymow," the fat little merchant complained. "Reckon I'm ready to turn this one-wheeled dray over to you, Charley, since you're lookin' for a job."

Charley snorted. On a day like this when everything was going against him, he could wear his feet down to nubbins,

freighting groceries, and never become the owner of a railroad.

"You ain't helpless," Charley said. "Tote your own stuff."

Leaving Jeff standing there pop-eyed, Charley stamped out into the boiling sunlight. He noticed that Sheriff Zebra Zorn had returned to town. Then he saw that Millie's pinto had pulled loose from the hitch-rail in front of the post office.

Charley crossed over and re-tied the pony. Turning away, he caught a glimpse of Punchy Pratt just before he ducked behind the post office building. But Charley didn't pay no mind to the kid. Punchy was forever making believe he was Jesse James, or some outlaw, sneaking away from a posse.

There was one lone shade tree in Cross-creek, and it stood near the town pump. Squinting against the midday glare, the long-legged ranny headed that way. Arriving at the pump, he tipped back his hat and saw that the four old spitters and whittlers had moved their checker board into the shade of the tree.

"The more I think about it," old Gil Grover, the banker, was saying, "the more I'm certain that there comes a day of days to every man, woman and child."

"Ain't no doubt about it!" Ed Biggers agreed heartily. "An' when that day comes to a gent, no matter what he does, everything works out just right and he allus lands on top."

"Take that one special day out of a man's life," old Sim Adams piped up, "and a man would be ruint for good. Like me, for instance. If you took that day away from me when I bought them tight shoes and—"

Charley Carter snorted. He snorted like a bull with his nose ring snagged on a fence post, and the four oldsters glanced up out of startled eyes.

"What's the matter with you, son?" Ed Biggers asked. "You got too much steam in your boilers, or somethin'?"

Charley didn't bother to answer. Giving another snort of disgust, he pulled his hat down over his eyes and went on to seek shade elsewhere.

THE FEED STORE had a porch on it, so he headed that way. But he hadn't no more than got located when Millie came tripping along, carrying a package.

"Hi," she said. "You about ready to go home? If you are, we might as well ride together."

Home? Charley didn't have no more home than a tumbleweed, now that he had broken off with his Uncle Ham. He swallowed hard and hunkered a little deeper in the shadows. Then, for no good reason at all that he could figure, he felt like a blundering idiot. That made him forget his manners.

"Why don't you have Gus ride with you?" he said coldly. "He likely don't have nothing better to do."

She stuck out her chin at him, and sparks leaped into her blue eyes. "Thanks for the suggestion," she said.

Head held high, she walked away, her spurs jingling angrily. And you can't blame her for wishing she wasn't such a lady so that she could tell Charley off. Ever since she'd been knee-high to a branding iron, she had looked upon Charley Carter as the young man most likely to become her husband. But Charley's response had not been enthusiastic. That was why she'd made a few goo-goo eyes at Gus Gordon, figuring that a stir of jealousy might cause Charley to get busy.

Lifting her eyes, she saw Gus standing with his back against the barber pole on the other side of the street. She waved and gave him a big smile.

Actually, she wasn't much sold on this slick newcomer. But she was plenty sore at Charley. She would show him what was what. So with an idea of asking Gus to ride out to the Bar M with her, she untied her pinto and swung into the saddle.

All the time, Charley was watching her from under his hat brim and wishing he could turn her over his knee and spank some sense into her. The way she walked with her head held high, her split skirt swishing about her bare legs, was plumb disgusting. She thought she was some-

body, all right. The way she swung into the saddle like she was queen of all the cowgirls was enough to make Charley froth at the mouth, and—

At that instant, the pinto snorted, laid back his ears and jumped about three feet straight into the air. Taken by surprise, the girl lost her package and the bridle reins. But she did manage to wrap her fingers around the saddle horn and hang on. The pinto squealed, circled and began to hop stiff-legged.

Charley couldn't understand it. That pinto was as gentle as a pup; and for a minute, he just sat there, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. He saw Gus across the street and wondered vaguely if Millie was putting on a show for him. Then he remembered about old Gil Grover's rescuing the banker's daughter and snorted in high disgust.

Well, he wasn't going out there and calm down Millie's pony. She wasn't no banker's daughter. Besides, on a day like this when every move he made led to trouble, he would likely get killed if he tried to stop—

Then Millie let out a terrified cry, and it hit Charley like a bucket of buckshot. The girl wasn't fooling. She was in real trouble and stood a good chance of getting hurt bad.

HE LEAPED to his feet. But he was about five seconds too late, for Gus Gordon was out there, going to the rescue like a knight in shining armor. Charley slunk back into the shade and watched Gus grab the flying reins and pull the pinto to a quivering stand-still.

Millie slid to the ground. She was white and shaken. Gus put one arm about her shoulders and held her close. He was the hero of the hour and he knew it and wasn't going to pass up a good thing like this. No, sir!

But in a minute, Millie got hold of herself and pulled away. Charley heard her laugh shakily.

"Pete never acted like that before," she said. "I can't understand it."

"Something must be wrong with that saddle," Gus said, scowling like a storm cloud.

"But," Millie said, "what could be—"

She let it go at that, for Gus had loosened the saddle and had found the cause of Pete's misbehavior.

"Who," he said in a loud voice, "would put this bent horseshoe nail under your saddle, Millie, so that when you climbed up the point would gouge Pete in the ribs?"

Millie just stood there with her mouth hanging open, staring blankly at the bent nail in Gus's white fingers.

"Somebodys' tried to get you hurt, Millie," Gus said.

"But who—"

"I don't know." Gus looked fiercely up and down the street. "But if I ever find out, he'd better leave the country before I get my hands on him!"

Then he said something to Millie that Charley didn't catch, and Millie nodded her head. A few minutes later, they rode side by side from town toward the Bar M.

Charley just sat there in the shade, grinding his teeth with rage and trying to figure who would want to get Millie hurt. Millie didn't have any enemies that he knew of. Of course, her old man was a salty old cuss and might have made someone sore enough to put a bent nail under the saddle. But to Charley that seemed like a mighty left-handed way to get even with old man McDuffee.

However, one thing was for sure—while he, Charley Carter, had sat here like a ninny, Gus Gordon had had enough sense to rush out and save Millie from a bad fall. There was no question who the hero was; and realizing this, Charley's spirits sank to about sixty below zero.

What a day this had turned out to be! A break with his Uncle Ham. His money gambled away. A fight with his best friend. And too slow on the trigger to go to Millie's rescue. If Charley had been double-jointed at the knees, he would likely have kicked himself all over town. As it was, he made up his mind to get his horse and leave the country

pronto, and never, never return.

Hitching up his pants, he stumbled toward the livery barn. At that moment, Sheriff Zebra Zorn stepped from his office and gave the young cowboy an unfriendly look.

"Charley," he called, "come here a minute."

Obligingly, Charley obeyed.

Zebra Zorn favored black and white striped shirts. He had one on now, with a somewhat rusty star pinned to it. He hooked fat thumbs under his gunbelt and glared at Charley.

"You ain't, by any chance, thinkin' of leavin' town, are you?" he asked gruffly.

"Not only am I thinking about it," Charley answered grimly, "but that's exactly what I'm about to do."

"Well, I got news for you," Zebra said coldly. "You ain't goin' no place except to jail!"

"What?" Charley bleated. "You crazy, or—"

"You can't come to town, start a fight and bust up a hundred dollars' worth of property and skin out without payin' for it," the sheriff said.

"Now, looky here," Charley began furiously. "You can't—"

"Don't try to tell me what I can't do!" Zebra bellowed. "It's such hot-headed cowpokes as you that give a town like this a bad reputation. Time I was making an example outa somebody, and it might as well be you!"

THE NEXT THING Charley knew, he was locked up tighter than a new boot on a rainy day. He sank down on the narrow wooden bunk in his cell and began to cuss.

"Yappin' ain't goin' to get you noplace," the sheriff said angrily, "so you might as well take it easy."

Realizing the truth of this, Charley stopped his swearing and cupped his bony chin in his big hands. All he needed now to complete this worst day in his life, he thought bitterly, was to have the jail fall in on him. At last, he lay back on the bunk and closed his weary eyes.

By and by, the sheriff brought him something to eat, but Charley ignored both food and lawdog. Pretty soon, it was sundown, and Charley began to wonder if he would have to stay here the rest of his life. He was trying to figure some way of breaking out of jail when a great commotion arose in the front office.

"Dang it all, Zebra," he heard his Uncle Ham yell, "let that boy outa there 'fore I tear down this blasted rat trap!"

Grinning suddenly, Charley sprang to his feet. Then he remembered that he'd left his uncle and the dear old Rocking M forever and didn't feel so happy. But he stood there at the barred door, listening, anyway.

It seemed that news of his nephew's arrest had reached Uncle Ham late that afternoon; and from the way the old maverick was stamping and snorting up there in the front office, it appeared that he didn't like this business no two ways from last Friday's breakfast.

"Any young feller's got a right to blow off steam now and then by gettin' into a good fist-fight!" he yelled.

"But he ain't got no right to bust up a hundred dollars' worth of property and try to get away without payin' for it!" Zebra yelled back.

"You take my check for it, or you got to have cash, you fat-headed star-toter?" Uncle Ham ranted. "Now, open that door. I got some things to say to that long-legged buzzard in there, and I don't aim to say 'em through a door."

Zebra unlocked the cell door. "Get outa here, Charley," he wheezed. "And take that danged old hellion with you before he tears up my jail."

Charley didn't lose no time getting out of there, and he and his Uncle Ham went out into the street.

"Get your hoss, son, and we'll head for home," Uncle Ham said.

CHARLEY didn't know what to say. It seemed mighty ungrateful of him to refuse to return to the Rocking M, and yet he couldn't forget he was twenty-one and fed up with being cuffed around like

a wet-eared kid. On the other hand, nothing would suit him better than going back to the old ranch.

But Uncle Ham seemed to read his mind. "I got plans for you, boy," he said. "Plans to take you in as my pardner. Had 'em for a long time, but figured that as long as you knuckled down to me like a whipped dog, you wouldn't make a very good pardner. Then this morning when you refused to take my bossin' any longer, I knew the time had come. But I thought I'd give you a chance to look around a little. Wanted you to be sure the Rocking M was what you wanted. Didn't have no idea you'd land in jail and—"

He was interrupted by the clatter of hoofs and old man McDuffee.

"Sheriff," McDuffee bellowed, "come here a minute."

Zebra hurried out, a harrassed expression on his fat face.

"Somebody tried to get Millie throwed this afternoon by putting this bent horseshoe nail under her saddle," McDuffee said. "Now, that's a low-down dirty trick in anybody's language, besides being dangerous. If it hadn't been for Gus Gordon, she might've been hurt bad."

"I bet I know who did it!" the sheriff cut in, suddenly looking mad enough to bite a hunk out of his own jail. "Charley Carter! I saw him foolin' with Millie's pinto this noon, and—"

"I," Charley said hoarsely, "was merely tying that pinto. He'd pulled loose, and—"

"And Charley was a-sittin 'there on the feed store steps and didn't make a move when that pinto began to buck."

"I," Charley said faintly, "was thinking about—"

"Charley," Zebra roared, "I'm goin' to lock you up again, and this time I will make an example outa you!"

"Just a minute, Sheriff." It was Dusty Dunn who had stepped up. "I happen to know who put that nail under her saddle. It was that kid, Punchy Pratt."

"I don't believe it!" Zebra said. "You're just tryin' to help out Charley because you and him are pals."

"Saw Punchy fooling around the pinto. Didn't think anything about it till the horse started to cut up. Cornered Punchy, and he admitted he did it. Gus Gordon paid him two dollars to do it. You can ask Punchy—"

"What?" Punchy yelled.

"Seems that Gus wanted to make himself look like a hero. I wasn't going to say anything about it since Millie wasn't hurt. Kind of sore at Charley for jumping me for saying that every dog has his day. But I can't let a pal go to jail—"

"You mean," Charley said thickly, "that coyote would do that just to get on the good side of Millie and her pa and—"

"Thanks, pal," Charley said in a somewhat unsteady voice. "Maybe you can tell me where Gus is at?"

"Him and Ace are in the Beefsteak Saloon, and—"

Not waiting to hear the rest, Charley made a run for the saloon.

GRINNING happily, Uncle Ham signed his name to a blank check and handed it to the sheriff. "You can fill in the amount," he said, "for whatever damage Charley does over there, lickin' the hell outa that slick side-winder."

Now it was a long time after this before Charley Carter saw the through of it. He and Millie had been married long enough to have quite a sizable family. The Rocking M and the Bar M had been put together and named the Double M. Charley had made a hatful of money with this big outfit. He had built a fine new ranch house for his family, bought the controlling interest is the Cross-creek bank, invested in railroad stocks and became part owner of a gold mine. All this had happened, and more, too, before he got around to thinking about it and then gone rushing out to find Dusty Dunn, who was foreman of the big Double M.

"Danged if it ain't the truth!" he said to Dusty. "Every dog does have his day!"

Dusty just grinned and nodded. He didn't have to be told that Charley was remembering back to that all-important day when he'd had his twenty-first birthday. • • •

By C. S. PARK

Pyatt's horse came to a whirling stop

APACHE BRAND

The desert hides no secrets from her chosen people. . . .

DEPUTY MARSHAL Herb Pyatt sat his quiet horse beside a great gray boulder. From this mountainside above dry Bull Springs, he could see a hundred square miles of Circle C range. The sun was still behind the Santa Rita's, but in the valley below darkness gradually crept upward from the deep arroyos. The world—Pyatt's world—was coming to life.

He put a thin cigar in his mouth, lit it

with care. Tilting his hat back he leaned on the saddle-horn as his contemplative gaze slid over the land. He scarcely saw it, though, for his thoughts were on Ward. Riding all through a windy night, he had thought about the man, and the necessity for speedy action had urged him on. Action to stop the floodtide of Apache anger poised to descend upon the unsuspecting white settlers of the Santa Rita Valley.

Suddenly, in this vast unpeopled land, he saw movement. In a deep arroyo which led upward to Bull Springs, an Indian on a white horse was driving a cow and her calf. Pyatt also saw something stir among the dark shadows that clung to the dry washes.

The Indian dropped a skillful loop. The calf tumbled gently, with hardly a sound. On it quick, the Indian tied furiously.

The cow, which had run on a little, stopped and came back, her head lowered. Her call came up to Pyatt on the little warm breeze. It was a plaintive sound.

Moving catlike, the Indian built his small fire of mesquite sticks.

Now Pyatt could see who had made that other movement. As a large man on a rangy dun stepped from shadow into clear bright sunlight, Pyatt recognized the burly figure of the rancher, Tom Ward.

The Indian—and Pyatt knew him now to be Nah-kah-yen, son of Bavispe, the Apache—turned from his small fire with a smoking iron. Pyatt watched him stride toward the calf, which lay quietly a few feet away.

The sound of the shot that came yammering up set Pyatt's horse at a plunging run back up the trail. Pyatt let him run it off, then dismounted and eased back down the trail to the big boulder afoot. But there was nothing now that he could do.

LAST night it had seemed that he could. Last night the wind, dry and dust-laden, had pushed forward through the sullen darkness. Off across the ragged edge of the Santa Ritas, lightning had danced. The distant rumble of thunder had been a monotonous threat creeping across the miles. And that wild night wind had blown trouble for Herb Pyatt before it.

He was a tall man with broad shoulders and a driving walk, a man easily distinguishable in the small settlement into which he'd ridden and dismounted. Holding down his gray stetson, he'd leaned far into the breeze, quartering across the single broad street, making his way with some difficulty. He'd entered Rideout's saloon on a gust of dust.

"A bitter night," he'd observed soberly. "Not fit for man or beast." He batted his eyes a couple of times, seen that Rideout, the fat bartender, was alone.

Rideout had lifted pouched eyes from a dog-eared newspaper.

"You can hope for better weather," he'd said, and let his gaze drift to the paper again. "There's always tomorrow."

"And tomorrow is always too late," Pyatt had said. "Where is everybody? Heard someone ride in awhile ago."

Rideout had said, "Nobody but an Indian would be out on a night like this. And him only if he couldn't send his squaw." He'd turned a frail page carefully. "Says here Congress might ratify General Davis's treaty with Bavispe's Apaches. That means they can live on the Santa Rita River delta forever."

Thoughtfully, Pyatt had drawn a cigar from his pocket, lit it. The smoke made a pleasant fragrance in the room.

"How old is that newspaper?" he asked.

Rideout had looked at the date line. "Seven years."

"Thought so," Pyatt had said, talking around his cigar. "Davis has been gone for five." He'd tilted his head, listening to the voice of the wind around the adobe building. "That's a good Apache, that Bavispe. He's proved that not all the good Indians are the dead ones."

"Not what Tom Ward thinks. He's going to move Bavispe off that land and take it over for his Circle C or know the reason why. Of course, he can't have it if Congress gave it to the Indians."

"Congress never got around to that. It's still public land."

"That's what I tried to tell Bavispe tonight," Rideout had said tonelessly, "but he didn't understand."

Gap-mouthed, Pyatt had stared at him.

Then Rideout had looked up and called across Pyatt's shoulder:

"Come on in, Bavispe." And he'd folded his newspaper.

Bavispe, the Apache leader, was rawhide lean and powerfully built. Age had stopped showing on him thirty years before. He'd been wearing cotton shirt and pants and a tall black hat set squarely on his head. His hair was long and braided. There could be no doubt he was a chief—he'd worn dignity like a cloak.

Behind him, standing in the dim light cast by the lamp on Rideout's bar, Pyatt had seen the forms of other Indians, waiting patiently outside the saloon. Standing in the windy street, unmoving.

"You fat white medicine man," Pyatt had said grimly to Rideout, "I should have known you were building up to something. You could have told me it was them rode into town!"

Rideout had grinned. "I wanted to get you primed first. Bavispe thinks you can do something about his trouble."

Pyatt and the silent Apache chief had shaken hands. Pyatt had fumbled for another cigar, given it to Bavispe.

"It is long since I visited the lodges of my brother," Pyatt had said gravely in the Apache tongue. "Then there were no lines of worry upon his face. Now it is creased, and long with the marks of his thoughts."

"It is because I am afraid," the Apache had replied, in words slow and measured. He'd held his cigar away from his lips with thumb and forefinger, spoken past it. "Once the cavalry was our friend. Now General Davis is gone, his station filled by a weak man."

BAVISPE had turned his head and spat upon the floor.

"I have heard," Pyatt had told him.

"You have heard, too, that the beef-stealer, Ward, seeks our rich farm land on which to pasture his stolen herds?"

Pyatt had nodded carefully. It was an accepted fact that Ward built his herds with cattle smuggled from Mexico, where they had been stolen from their owners.

"My son, Nah-kah-yen, a brave but unwise Indian who has taken work with Ward tells me of Ward's plans," Bavispe had said somberly. "I sought advice and help where once I met with great aid and understanding—the cavalry. They said, 'We can do nothing. See the marshal—maybe he will help you. But these people are too busy. They have no time for raggedy-tailed Apaches."

As he'd puffed on the cigar, each strong drag had burned the dry tobacco down a bright inch. His eyes had dulled as he stared at Pyatt.

"For this cavalry," he'd said, "Bavispe has no liking. The United States Marshal he does not know. But the deputy, Pyatt, is Bavispe's brother. Bavispe said to his people, 'Pyatt will help.' "

And right there was where he'd left it.

Pyatt had remained silent. Bavispe would never understand that the land the Apaches held was public land, that Congress, procrastinating, had never ratified Davis's treaty. Davis had guaranteed Bavispe from molestation, but he was gone. And Ward, once located on the Santa Rita delta, would be hard to dislodge.

Pyatt knew what the cavalry did not realize—that Ward's greed would set the territory back twenty years. And the silent nights would echo with the haunting signals of Bavispe's rampaging Apaches closing in for the dawn kill.

No, the cavalry's way was not the way to deal with Bavispe. Nor with Ward.

General Davis would have known what was needed. Ward needed to be rocked back on his heels. Now! Before the desert spaces would again surge with the screeches of raiding Apaches, the desert washes again run with the blood of innocent people whose only crime would be belonging to the white race.

If Ward could be delayed, political pressure brought to bear in Washington, Congress might still make the Apache secure.

Rideout had reached into the depths of a sweating *olla,* handed over two bottles of lemon soda where they'd cooled. Pyatt had reached for his, swung around to lean against the bar. He'd tilted his hat back on his head, a preoccupied gesture.

Slowly, Rideout had said into the quiet,

"You got it straight now, Herb," and rolled a cigarette. On his round face had been a bland smile.

And Pyatt had made his decision.

"Tomorrow," he'd said, "I will talk with Ward."

Bavispe had nodded gravely. "I ask only that you interest yourself in us, my brother. If you fail, I cannot be held to account for the actions of my people." He drained his bottle, set it on the bar. Turning, he'd left them abruptly.

Outside, briefly, had been only the sound of wind in mud-and-straw roofs. Then the noise of many running horses had swept into the still room. The Apaches had gone in the night, riding down the dusty breezes into their desert.

Silence again had come to the saloon, except for the slow drip-drip of water trickling off the *olla.*

Then Rideout had spoken softly. "My little white brother, you sure got your work cut out for you."

Pyatt had smiled ruefully, tipping his hat forward over his eyes. Shoving his lemon soda aside, he'd said, "Give me a thinking drink and shut up."

"It'll take more than thinking, I'm afraid." Rideout had set out bottle and glass.

"Those people," Pyatt had remarked, "think a white man can do anything."

"Not just any white man. You!"

"Yeah," Pyatt had said, tilting the bottle over the glass. "I know. Tomorrow I'll think of something. . . ."

NOW, on the mountainside above Bull Springs, he realized that he had not thought of anything in time, and had arrived too late to save Bavispe's son, Nah-kah-yen. But at least he could apprehend his killer.

He eased back to his horse. Swinging up, his plan made, quietly he came down the trail. When concealment was no longer possible, he nudged his horse. They came off the mountain at a high run.

Ward was bent over the calf. A branding-iron was in his hand. He straightened quickly when the sound of hammering hoofs reached his ears. The iron fell to the sand. The look of complete surprise on his face was still there when he moved over to his horse and reached for the short rifle in its saddle scabbard.

The horse, skittish from the smell of blood, danced away. Ward followed.

Pyatt closed fast, his .44 ready in his hand.

"Hold it, Ward!" he shouted into the wind.

But Ward, in a desperate move, succeeded in scrabbling the carbine from its boot.

Whirling, he dropped to one knee. Sweeping up the carbine, he pressed it into his shoulder and fired.

Pyatt felt the wind of the bullet's passage as he drew down on the kneeling man, fired. A running horse was no platform from which to shoot, so he missed. His bullet sprayed sand over Ward. He kneed his horse directly at the rancher. A few more jumps and he would run the man down.

He saw the bloom of smoke. His horse, startled at the loud explosion under his nose, bucked to a whirling, jumping stop. Pyatt, unbalanced, plunged over the animal's ears. He struck the sand on his head and shoulder. Only his high hat saved him from a cracked skull as he plowed into a jagged rock. He blacked out.

The sun, hot on his face, burned him around finally. He came up out of it slowly, letting consciousness and memory and pain return as they would. He lay still until everything had come back to him. Only then did he stir, feeling the soreness of his muscles, the throbbing ache of his head. He tried to sit up, and saw that he was tied, mummy-like, with a rawhide riata. He was out of circulation.

Bleakly he realized that he was alive now only because of some planning of Ward's for Ward would well know his own life was forfeit if Pyatt lived. Murder—even the murder of an Apache—was no longer condoned in the Territory. Old Fort Yuma was thronged with lifetime inmates who had thought it was.

Twisting his head, Pyatt saw that Ward was gone. The horses were gone. Nah-kah-yen's body was gone. The cow and her calf had gone, out of sight and out of earshot.

So Pyatt was alone in a vast baked area through which no one ever traveled, except

perhaps Ward and his men. And there would be no help from them.

It became, then, only a question of time. Either the sun, drawing every bit of moisture from his body, would finish him before he could wear his way, somehow, through the tough leather rope that bound him, or Ward would. He wondered why Ward had not already done the job, but found no answer.

He tried to figure Ward's thinking. What was the man doing now? What had he done with Nah-kah-yen's body? And with a rush of memory, Pyatt thought of Bavispe and his Apaches. Bitterly. For Pyatt had certainly done nothing to help their cause at Bull Springs.

The dried-up watering place lay on a broad shelf, elevated above the floor of the sweeping Santa Rita River Valley. Across its width, through the heat haze that was rising, Pyatt could see the dim green of Bavispe's fields.

Bavispe, who had come so far from being the marauder of the desert he once had been, keeping the whole Territory jumping in fear and trembling. He'd made fabulous marches over desert and mountain drawing his warriors together by smoke signal and mirror flash.

Mirror flash!

THE sun slanted down from the heavens. It aimed a shaft of light at Pyatt's breast. The polished badge on his vest gave it back. The glint of the exchange bothered him. He shifted. A light reflection danced across the dark mesquite with the movement.

Pyatt came alive with hope. Rolling and sliding, he made his hampered way to the trunk of an ancient oak, worked himself into a sitting position against it. Directing the speck of light from his badge out across the flat Santa Rita Valley, he rocked from side to side.

He rocked until his back against the rough tree bark and his wrists in the tight bonds of the rawhide rope were scratched and bleeding. He rocked until his buttocks were sore and swelling. He rocked until every muscle in his body was a vast pain, and his injured head ached splittingly.

Then, finally, far out on the valley floor, there came one answering flash of light. Pyatt slumped.

The sun, turned from enemy to ally, climbed higher. The leaves of the oak formed a canopy of shade over him. Pyatt slept.

Nor did he awaken when Bavispe and his men came. Perhaps he would not have known of their arrival awake, for the manner of their coming was that of the desert.

First there was nothing but the bound, hurt, unconscious man lying by the hoary bole of the aged oak. Then around him five Apaches materialized out of the mesquites. They were not dressed in the conventional manner of peaceful men, but wore the stripped-down garb of a readiness for war.

Bavispe, squatting, untied the lariat. Pyatt awoke.

Standing, painfully removing his bonds, he stepped out of them. His mind was absorbing the implications of the Apache war paint, their glum silence. He was the first to break it.

"Nah-kah-yen is dead," he said.

Looking into the dark, opaque eyes of Bavispe he saw nothing there but hatred.

"We know," Bavispe replied, waving his arm in a shoulder-high gesture. "The desert has no secrets from her chosen people."

"Where is Ward?"

"Even now on the road to Santa Rita, which he would have reached long ago if he had not stopped for drink at his house. And if he had not gathered his men about him to escort him—and the body of my son—he would be dead now." There was only danger in his angry tones.

Pyatt shook his head slowly. "There is another way, my brother," he said.

Angrily, Bavispe spat. "The white man's way? Do nothing? Nothing, because Nah-kah-yen was only an Apache? What kind of a brother is this? Do you know a better way, brother?" He used the word in a manner that showed his disgust.

"I do," Pyatt said quietly. "If we can get to Santa Rita before Ward can get done whatever he plans to do." There was grim finality about the lawman now.

Some time later they came down the dust of Kitchen Alley in Santa Rita. The lowering sun was at their backs. Pyatt reined up

before the Carson house, swung off. He looped his reins over the worn mesquite rail, next to the white horse, where flies were already thick on Nah-kah-yen's stiffening body.

Pyatt wondered at the absence of people in the street. Wearily he clumped into the saloon. Here he saw the reason for the vacant town. The place was packed with intent men. No head turned as he entered.

Ward was dancing an angry dance. His face was mottled, and his loud voice was hoarse.

Pyatt relaxed against the door frame. Behind him in the street, the skeptical Apaches waited stoically. He fingered a long cigar from his pocket as he listened to Ward's ranting. Standing easily, Pyatt let pain and weariness seep gently out of him.

WARD'S words flowed rapidly. A bottle of whisky was in his hand and he carelessly brandished it as he talked. Some of the liquor spilled to the splintery pine floor.

He was shouting, "I come up to Bull Springs and come up on that damned Apache branding one of my calves! Putting the brand of them damned Bavispe Apaches on it. He started to come around at me with a knife! I shot him in self-defense."

He took a long drag from the bottle and glared about. He did not see Pyatt by the door, nor the Apaches in the street outside.

"I tell you men it's a thieves' nest we have in our middle. Stealing's in their blood. I give that sneaking Nah-kah-yen a job, and what does he do? Turns around and steals my calves to build up that Apache herd! No telling how many he has taken—him and his kind—from me and you and everybody who's got a spread."

His voice rose to a frantic shout. "Stealing my cattle! Them Apaches ain't human—never will be! They take what you give them from your one hand, and steal out of the other when you ain't looking! Davis's treaty says they keep their lands as long as they abide by our laws, but they're breaking 'em! And Davis—he ain't here any more."

Calm now, he turned to the bar. He set the bottle down, letting what he'd said sink in.

And Pyatt saw his reasoning.

Ward had never intended to carry all the responsibility for moving the Apaches off their lands. His intention was obvious now. Get the other ranchers worked up, and the movement would be the result of mob action. The strategy was effective. Men were eying each other in sober thought.

Whites had a natural distrust for the Indians who lived among them. In cases such as this, the Indian was always wrong unless he could prove himself right. There were too few white men interested in the welfare of the tribes. The mistrust came from a lack of understanding. From that, and from memories of past Apache atrocities.

Gradually, unrest crept into the room. Tension grew stronger. Men shifted uneasily.

Pyatt, who could read signs in humans better than most, read these and knew it was time for him to act.

"Nah-kah-yen was murdered!" He said it quietly, but his words exploded in the room like thunderous gunfire "Killing an Indian nowadays is a Federal offense. Ward, you're under arrest for the murder of Nah-kah-yen!"

Ward came around on Pyatt instantly, grim-faced with the knowledge that his guilt had caught up with him. Pyatt saw what he'd been watching for deep in Ward's eyes. He moved out from the door.

Ward crouched and leaned forward.

"What do you mean?" he yelled. "Where's your evidence? It's your word against mine!"

Pyatt didn't raise his voice. "I mean that I was above Bull Springs when you shot Nah-kah-yen as he was about to brand one of your calves—with your brand. And you shot him down!" He held a short pause, eying Ward. "And you would have killed me if you'd been a better marksman!"

Here were honest ranchers trying to build a new country on foundations that in part were rotten because Ward and men like him had been the first to settle it. Ward and his ilk had rustled and smuggled cattle from the Mexicans and from each other. They had fought the Indians and themselves, had lived and died violently.

But these later settlers were opposed to

violence. They were opposed to further impositions on nomadic Indians who had already been driven from their natural habitat and forced to settle. These were the solid citizens, interested in square dealing, knowing that nothing strong can ever be erected upon underpinnings of deceit.

Ward sensed the direction of their thought, their sudden shift.

Desperately he yelled, "More lies! Everybody knows Pyatt is an Indian lover!"

He stretched out his arms in appeal, looked about questioningly. But the eyes into which he looked were veiled. And he knew he had lost.

DESPERATE anger was on him. He knew that for him the gates of Yuma were opening.

Carefully, Pyatt raised his arm, his thumb pointing back over his shoulder. "The bullet in Nah-kah-yen's body would not lie. Nor the marks on my body where you tied me!"

Watching Ward's eyes, Pyatt knew when the man passed the bounds of reason, and the killer instinct took charge. Ward made his play fast.

His hand slapped sharply hipward. It knocked the butt of his right-hand gun down. The barrel came up. He fired—through the bottom of the holster. He drew his left-hand gun.

The bullet splintered the door frame behind Pyatt. Ward tried another shot. Too late.

Pyatt had made his draw carefully. His aim was certain. His bullet caught Ward in the chest.

Ward took a slow step. His legs crumpled, let him down. His second, and last, shot ploughed a trench in the scuffed floor.

Symbolically, he fell almost at the feet of Bavispe who had slid in unnoticed.

"I am sorry that I doubted, my brother," Bavispe said into Pyatt's ear, and slipped as unobtrusively away.

Almost before the first excited men tumbled from the saloon to the street, the Apache chief, with his men and the body of Nah-kah-yen, was gone. . . .

A couple of evenings later Pyatt rode wearily into Dos Cabezones town and dismounted before Rideout's saloon door. The night breeze coming up from Sonora was soft. The air was clear. His tired gaze around the ragged horizon found no flicker of lightning.

He pushed inside. Rideout put down a frayed newspaper and then set out bottle and glass.

Pyatt tipped the bottle, watched the liquid flow. Somberly he glanced up from under his stetson.

"Rideout, old friend," he said wonderingly, "maybe you'll tell me how these things operate. What Ward didn't count on was that in all this wide-open Territory, big and empty as it is, there would be someone in that particular place at that particular time to see him. A few minutes, a few miles either way, I'd not have been there, and he'd have done what he wanted—roused the settlers to kill and drive out the Apaches."

He tipped his head back and tossed off his drink.

Rideout said softly, "And you stopped that. A white man kills an Indian, a white man kills the killer. That's the kind of justice that Bavispe can understand and believe in. It'll save the Indians' land, maybe even until Congress can get around to legalizing it for them. And"—he spoke more softly—"Herb! Maybe some don't know it, but some time they will. You saved an awful lot of bearded white throats from being cut from ear to ear, a lot of brains from being roasted over a slow fire, while they're still in living skulls."

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The sheriff led two ponies bearing two corpses

A Bullet for the Paiute Kid

By T. C. McCLARY

AT HIGH NOON, Sheriff John Gaunt got back to Silver Bow leading two foundered ponies bearing two badly bullet-riddled corpses. From the edge of town, he looked down the chrome gray street through the glare of lemon-colored light and wished it were night so that he could avoid the curiosity seekers.

The town wouldn't know that he'd missed a man. But he knew it, and the

Even the woman who loved him could not convince Sheriff John Gaunt that a man with a shady past was not necessarily all bad

knowledge was like lye working in him. It had been a prolonged running fight and the other man's horse had been too fast. Gaunt had not even caught a good glimpse of him. But the man's horse had been a palomino. And this being cayuse country, a man on a palomino would be easily spotted.

He looked neither to right nor left as he rode into town. Calls of homage from the onlooking townsfolk did nothing to ease the hard containment of his blunt square face. It was a rough mood he was in—even for him. His face looked as if he considered their praise akin to insult.

From the tail of his eye he saw Chris Oliver lounging back against the wall of the Wells Fargo office riffling silver dollars in his limber fingers. Oliver looked all jingle-jangle, and his handsome face was seamed with an amused smirk as he read Gaunt's mood.

Oliver had his own ranch but he was hard to peg. Either he was luckier than the devil or the best trader this side of kingdom come—or else he had closer dealings with outlaws than just a friendly deal or a game of poker. He had been a hell-raiser at times, but had always covered himself against any charge on which the sheriff could pick him up.

It was a matter that irked Gaunt, for the buckaroo had too much money at odd times, and was too smug about the way he came by it. It was Gaunt's conviction that those with the wild streak were all potential or uncaught outlaws anyway, their activities limited only by their opportunities. In his book, they were all marked for a sixgun funeral or the gallows, and the quicker they got it, the better for the community.

Gaunt thought, damned funny he is around and two-bit rich. He sure never ran that cavvy across the Green!

It was one of the small facets of town life that he noted in the course of things and pigeon holed for what it might be worth some time in the future. He saw his deputy duck under the hitchrack in front of the office and stand waiting for him.

His deputy knew his boss. He simply nodded at the Jackson corpses and asked, "What do you want me to do with 'em, John?"

"Tag 'em and lay 'em out in the jail a spell," the sheriff said.

"They're going to stink some and we've got some small fry prisoners," the deputy pointed out.

A twitch of ruthless contempt jerked at Gaunt's leathery face. "Then let 'em smell what they call big fry and learn all snakes stink the same in the end!" he growled.

The deputy caught the lead rein and nodded. "Nothing important since you left. Chris Oliver got back riding one beaut of a palomino."

"A *palomino?*" Gaunt repeated on a sharp note.

The deputy looked at him with curiosity. "Seventeen hands. Tall horse. Mean anything?"

"Likely means he's a damned horse-thief!" Gaunt snorted. Even with his deputy, he could not unbend. He could not bring himself to admit that any criminal had outsmarted him. "When did he come in?" he added.

"Two days back this noon. Long run and came in wet. But his pony wasn't gaunted."

Gaunt's hard mouth compressed. That would have been a mighty fast run from where the third outlaw cut out from the Jacksons. But a rider who knew the country might have made it.

HE ORDERED his deputy to stable his pony and angled across the street for Donohue's saloon. He swung stiffly from his saddle, hoisting his belts but not limbering. He glowered bristlingly at men who drifted toward him, rebuffing their curiosity and stopping them dead in their tracks.

Corrinne James was a different thing though. She came from Adler's Notions Store swiftly, the dark beauty of her face showing both relief and worry. "*John!*" she called.

He'd seen her, of course. He saw every

movement on the landscape. But he had set his steps for Donohue's, and now he turned back grudgingly.

"Did you want to dodge me?" she asked with nettlement.

"Well, I am a mite grimy," he said. "I had meant to stop by later if I'm still welcome."

"Welcome?" she asked. "You know you always are!"

He made a gesture. "You were a bit sharp that I took off after the Jacksons."

She colored faintly and then put a woman's guards on her expression. "I guess a woman shouldn't concern herself with sheriff's business," she smiled apologetically. "Come by later. . ." She broke off and her eye sharpened. "John, you've been hurt!"

He scowled and growled, "Dang your sharp eyes! It's nothing I even want mentioned. I'll ride out toward sundown."

She nodded to indicate she understood his mood, pressed his shoulder and turned upstreet. He stood a moment, frowning, wondering how it was possible that she could love him and still think the hard things of him she did. Yet he knew that, for all her popularity, she had no deep feelings for any other man.

He went into Donohue's saloon, had a double drink and left by the back door to avoid any of the curious who might drift. A little later he was mounting the alley stairs to Doc Sawyer's office. Doc dropped his head to peer over his glasses at Gaunt as the sheriff entered. "Figured you might be coming up, from the way you got off that pony," the doctor said.

Gaunt knuckled back his hat and stood with one balled fist on his hip. "That plain?" he asked roughly.

"To a doctor, yes," Sawyer grunted. "I don't reckon anybody else would know you're toting lead." He jerked his rumpled head at a table. "Strip and lie out and we'll see how long you've got to live."

"Long enough," Gaunt told him, "to put a few more lobos where they belong!"

Doc examined a scalpel and a probe. "You're a hard man, John," he opined with professional privilege. "Death's a high price for a little hell raising the boys did five-hundred miles from home. And maybe there were some things to be said for them."

Gaunt snorted. "They were the wild breed," he said. "There isn't an ounce of decency or honest courage in any one of their kind!"

Doc lanced his side and Gaunt winced but locked his solid jaws and lay motionless. At the end of the cutting, he sat up and scowled. "Boot hill is the only treatment for them!"

"What?" Doc queried puzzled, then grinned. "Oh! The outlaw brand! Well, I've known some who weren't all bad."

Gaunt's eyes blazed at him coldly. "You've know some I haven't then!"

Doc finished dressing his wound and poked him in the shoulder. "You watch out that hardness doesn't settle in your arteries. It has been the undoing of some pretty fine men."

Gaunt's answer was a look of cold anger. It raged him that Doc Sawyer could have a charitable thought for any of the wild breed, or be critical of him, for his unyielding contempt for them.

"They're all snakes!" he said. "There are big ones and little ones, but they're all bad!"

His voice was harsh, resistant to argument. Like anybody else, he could have taken the easy way himself—but he hadn't. And he had no use for any weakness in a man coupled with a burning hatred for the wild bunch and the outlaw brand.

SHERIFF GAUNT used the back alley to his house furious that he'd been shot and determined to squelch any attempt by maudlin spinners of outlaw sagas to build up a legend about the toughness of the Jacksons.

They'd given him a fight, but he'd not admit they'd been tough or shown any courage. They'd run before him like jackrabbits until their ponies began to

wind and they had to take a stand. It was like the breed that one of their number—the third rider he hadn't caught—should desert them before the end.

He entered his house by the back way and managed to get by Mrs. Moffett, his housekeeper, who'd already heard he was back and had heated some water so he could bathe and was preparing some vittles for him. He bathed and ate and took a nap. When he awakened refreshed, day had shifted to evening's pastel light, and he was feeling pretty good again.

He walked to his office, did the routine work which had accumulated during a full week's absence, and checked in the Jackson corpses. He stopped to buy some cigars, evading the curious questions of the cigar clerk, then went to the stables for a fresh pony.

Corrinne James lived on a strip of bench land at the bend of the valley. Privately, Gaunt was proud of her way with men, so he was neither surprised nor disturbed at the sound of a guitar and singing he heard as he rode toward her house—until he saw the two ponies tethered at the corral. One a cayuse—the other a palomino! His gaze rivetted on the two mounts. The palomino was a true beauty, as his deputy had said—short-barreled, long-legged, powerful-chested and intelligent-faced. It was a mustang, but almost a complete throw-back to some truly great Barb ancestor.

He looked at the brand, recognized it had been overworked, and doubted if the new brand actually existed. However, it would prevent identification of the horse's true ownership. He looked it over for some sign of gaunt his deputy might have missed and found none. But he did not let the fact weigh in Chris Oliver's favor, except as sign that Oliver was the kind of horseman who knew how to ride and treat his horse, which most did not.

In a different man, he might have admired the point. But his distrust of Oliver made him attribute the trait to softness—the driveling sentimentality for horseflesh that so often went with the worst of the bad breed and the sneakiest of bushwhackers. His chief impression was of the pony's form and value. In twenty-five-dollar horse country, this pony was still worth five-hundred dollars.

He swung toward the house and found Oliver watching him from a corner of the stoop, strumming a guitar. He gave the instrument a discordant *plink* as the sheriff started toward him, then strolled out of sight around the corner.

Corrinne greeted Gaunt with the easy smile of their close acquaintanceship. But there was no answering smile on his face when he saw her two visitors. He said gruffly to Oliver, who had returned with her, "Thought you were running a cavvy over beyond the Green to trade?"

Oliver's dark eyes mocked him. Quite aside from the girl, he took wild-humored pleasure in goading Gaunt over his passion for law and order. He laid his guitar on a table and built himself a smoke. "Well, I started out," he acknowledged, "but I am not the bear for long riding that you are, Sheriff. So I traded my string nearer."

Gaunt's gray eyes were hard as a cold winter sky. "For the palomino?"

OLIVER nodded and grinned as he lighted his smoke. "Good pony. You'd have been back sooner and lighter if the Jacksons had been riding ponies like him."

Gaunt bristled. "It wasn't the Jacksons' *ponies* let them down. It was their yellow guts!"

Oliver raised his eyebrows. "That so? I heard in town the ponies came in foundered."

The sheriff darkened angrily. "You got any idea any horse in the world will get a criminal away from me, just try riding ahead of me sometime!" he warned him.

"Why," Chris Oliver chuckled, "that could well happen, Sheriff, you take after a man so easy."

The girl put in, "Boys! I'm not running a battleground!"

Oliver made a bland gesture. "Not my fault your friend wants to keep law

and order for the whole United States, Corrinne. The Jacksons never built any trouble hereabouts, and everybody knows it. That was just an out-state flyer the sheriff took so serious."

"Some more flyers came in while I was gone," Gaunt rasped, "some for horse stealing."

The girl flamed with embarrassment, but Oliver just laughed. "There goes your loan of the palomino, Corrinne!" he told her. "I wouldn't want you to risk being picked up for a horse thief."

He plinked his guitar, slung it over his shoulder and jerked his head at Dan Wright, his partner. "Come along, son, before the *law* decides to lock us up for *singing.*"

The girl walked them to the corner of the stoop and stood there while they dusted off into the waning light of sundown. She returned with quiet anger on her face. "What did you have to say a thing like that for, John?" she demanded. "Are you getting so warped with hate that a man can't even make a good horse trade without you getting suspicious?"

He cut the air with the side of his hand and frowned impatiently. "Dang it, Corrinne. Why do you keep on standing up for the wild bunch? Don't tell me he got that pony in trade for a flea-bitten, half-broke, mustang-rough string!"

"He traded it," she stated icily, "off A. T. Tabbert!"

"Where did you learn that?" he asked.

"Chris told me!"

"*He* told you?" Gaunt guffawed.

"It's easy enough to check!" she pointed out.

Gaunt's humor shut off like a tap. "Fortunately for Oliver, it isn't. A. T. Tabbert died a week ago Wednesday at High Falls."

Her body went taut and her face pale with momentary confusion. Then her loyalty refuted the insinuation and she said steadfastly, "I still believe Chris!"

His pride wouldn't take that. He rejected her opinion flatly. He said bluntly, "If that's the way you feel, I will stay out of your way until I can make you see you're wrong."

He bowed stiffly and tapped off the stoop, knowing her hand stretched out to stop him, but not stopping. Her distrust of his judgment and her refusal to recognize the rightness of his hatred were things that struck at the very core of his self confidence.

DURING the summer he saw her often in town but he never permitted himself to be caught alone with her. He knew she saw a good deal of Chris Oliver. And the knowledge gnawed at his insides. But the fact just made things tougher for him when rustlers began raiding the next county, sometimes overlapping into his jurisdiction, and he learned that one of the rustler ponies was a tall palomino.

By rights, he considered, he should pick up Chris on suspicion—or on some minor charge—and beat the truth out of him. But, because of Corrinne, he couldn't. Nothing Oliver might ever admit would fully convince her that Gaunt had not gone after him out of jealousy and hatred.

He had to do this thing the hard way. He had to hit the trail with nothing but a bare suspicion that the rustling outfit was the Dewars, a wild-horse hunting outfit that Chris occasionally rode with. Six grueling weeks on the trail convinced him that his suspicion must be right.

Most of the six weeks he had been without a fresh horse, sometimes without water, often without food. Three times he had to turn tail and run before the rustlers' guns, an act he hated himself for. Another three times he had stand-off fights with them across gulches. Once he roused the neighboring sheriff's jealousy and had to swallow being warned out of the county like any common saddle-bum.

But then, in the far distance, one sundown, he made out the dust and flashing horns of a small herd trailing over country where no herd should have been. It was being trailed by three men, one of whom rode a palomino.

He stopped against the screen of a hill

and watched, his teeth setting edge to edge with core-deep satisfaction. He had known he was right, yet now he knew that Corrinne's stubborn defense of Oliver had thrown a doubt of his own judgment into him. Well, there was no more doubt. There was the proof, winding off along the thin, uncertain trail up into the hardrock country—rustled cattle for sure, and a rider on a palomino. He'd catch Oliver red-handed and make him crawl, and show him up to Corrinne for just what he was.

Now, by gawdamighty, he'd make up for lost time. This was still the next county, but no herd could be held up in that rock country. The rustlers were using an old antelope pass over into his own bailiwick's back country, where there were some well-watered holes with tall, sun cured grasses.

He felt the grim temptation to follow the trail straight through from where he was. But it would be a small saving of miles, and it was rock trail and his pony was badly gaunted. He bit down his impatience and decided to skirt this side of the hills and go out from Silver Bow. There'd be nothing lost. There were only two ways in or out of that back country, and the rustlers would be taking it easy, trying to keep their beef fattened up.

He cut down-country through the long still afterglow of sundown and rode on through the cool stillness of twilight. The stars came out to put their pale blue light behind the solid darkness of the hills. There had been a time when a scene like this never failed to arouse in him tender thoughts of Corrinne. But now he thought with vindictive savagery of Chris Oliver, and of the way he'd trail him, drive him, smoke him out, and make him own up to his yellow guts and treachery.

About nine o'clock, he arrived at the Murdough spread. His hoarse-voiced call echoed against Murdough's ranch house and he was hailed in. Hobbling stiffly into the ranch house doorway's yellow light, he heard Murdough mutter, "Good lord, it's Gaunt and he's sure gaunted! Fetch the bottle and shake up the cook."

THE BIG RANCHER reached an arm around his shoulders and helped him inside. Shortly, his daughter appeared with the bottle, and put more logs on the fire. Suddenly Gaunt realized for the first time, he was shivering. He scowled, "Mite cooler up in the hills than I figured."

Murdough chuckled, "Come off! You're just plumb wore out from too much saddle. You stay here and vittle up a few days."

The sheriff downed the fiery liquid and gave a thankful bark of breath. "No time. I'll stoke up and borrow a fast pony if you've got one to spare."

"Take mine," Murdough offered. "But don't you dast get him shot up, Sheriff!"

The cook stuck his head in to announce, "Steak, bacon, eggs, homefries and biscuits." Did Gaunt want flapjacks as well?

Gaunt said no. He wanted to travel light. Passing into the dining room, he got a look at himself in the mirror. He looked like a corpse that had come back to life. But after the meal and another drink and a cigar, he began to feel better. And with the return of his strength the anger settled inside of him, came to a boil again.

He slept a while, the dead stupored sleep of fatigue. Then Murdough woke him, stoked him with black and bitter java and led him out to his fresh saddled pony. "Take it easy, John," he advised. "A few rustled cows ain't worth any man's life."

"They'll be worth the rustlers' necks!" the sheriff promised grimly.

Murdough frowned slightly and looked down at the ground's darkness. "Truth is, for rustlers, they ain't been too bad," he allowed. "There's been no murder or mayhem that I know of. They've cut their stock out smart. They haven't run off everything in sight to leave half of it dying along the trail."

Gaunt's eyes drilled him. He said finally, "Reason you ranchers keep getting rustled and killed, is you're all soft until some sidewinder stings you good!"

"Well, mebbe," the rancher agreed. "But I always figure, there but for the

grace of God goes me, except I got off on the right foot."

"They pick the foot they start on," Gaunt said flatly. "The pattern is always the same. They wind up shot or in a noose, but decent folk get hurt first."

He left his blunt pronouncement hanging in the air and rode out. Three hours later, he angled down across the James place. Noting the downstairs alight, he sent in his shrill trail call.

The door flung open and Corrinne's voice hailed him, "John, for God's sake, stop!"

He swung over to her stoop and saw the flash of her skirts as her dark shadow darted toward him. "Trouble?" he asked. "Not your pa?"

"No, it's not that kind," she answered stridently. "It's — Chris Oliver."

Ugliness welled up in him. "He been giving you trouble?"

She looked up at him with a little gasp of denial. "No—it's that we've given it to him! The Paiute Kid hit town yesterday—gunning for you, I heard. Tonight, I had to tell Chris. . . ."

She broke off and he thought he made out her blush in a random ray of light. Then she said with force, "Well, I told him you and I might never marry, but there'd never be another man for me either way. He rode into town to have a few drinks, I guess. He heard the Paiute Kid had made some slurring remark about you and me in a saloon. Bob Engels just rode out to say he's building trouble."

Gaunt leaned a little in the saddle and lifted her chin with his calloused hand. "Chris Oliver was here *tonight?*" he demanded. "He brought me home from Hettie Hutching's shower," she said. "What about it?"

GAUNT FELT dizzy. The revelation had shocked him more than any blow he'd ever had. It meant it had not been Oliver riding that pass on a palomino. And yet, if he'd met Oliver on trail, he'd have shot it out with him in the certain belief that it had been him. Worse, from the standpoint of the right-

[*Turn page*]

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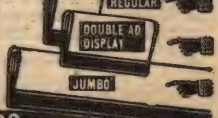

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ness of his judgment, Chris Oliver now was walking into something that was pure venom. Whatever he might be at his craven end, alive and standing, the Paiute Kid was greased lightning and sheer rattlesnake. It took flaming, drunken temper or ice-cold nerve to breast a gun-hand like the Kid.

No, not even for glory, not even in anger or to impress the girl, was it possible that one of Oliver's breed would take the risk. There'd be an angle to it. It was probably some kind of elaborate story that others of the wild bunch would build, even though there'd never been a bullet spent. Or maybe, with rotgut valor, Chris hoped to fort up in darkness and catch the Kid when he formed a lighted target—if he didn't get buck fever and get blasted into a gory end.

It had to be some setup like that, or else Gaunt's whole basis of law and rightness and his relentless hatred of the wild breed would be proven false. It would make a mockery and crime of every unnecessary arrest and killing he'd ever committed. It would utterly mangle his own self respect, his pride in his merciless opinion.

He reacted with cold, unyielding suspicion. Either the whole story was an outright fable, or some kind of setup meant to trap him. Maybe they'd had word he was coming in, and this was meant for a squeeze play to catch him off guard and in the middle.

The girl laid her face against his hand and her cheek was damp. "John, he isn't in the class of the Paiute Kid! It would be murder. Don't let it happen!"

He said with bitter flintiness, "So I'm too tough to marry, but not too tough to count on in a pinch! Well, don't worry. Nothing's going to happen."

She mis-read his words and pressed his hand. "Thank you, John! You can be big—you can be as hard on yourself as on another man. That's meant a lot to me."

Awkward gentleness broke his toughness for an instant and he put a fond hand upon her head. Then he gave a man's tight drawn smile and swung his

pony, and rode at a dead run toward the glow of town.

He came into town fast, but not too fast to cut sign. The whole town was gathered with its attention riveted on Donohue's. The excitement of a fight—that mean, bloodthirsty excitement of the cautious without the guts to make their own fights—drifted off the crowd in a raw smell.

He racked without attracting any attention. The crowd, eyes and ears intent upon what was happening inside the saloon, did not see him dismount, rack his horse. Taking time to limber up, he saw Oliver's palomino nearby and cursed it. It was fresh, and there wasn't a chance it was the same horse he'd seen with the rustlers.

He splayed his gun hand to the fullest, felt stiffness in the muscles, and set his mouth grimly. Except for Oliver, he would have floated around town awhile, letting word of his arrival work on the Paiute Kid, and then approach with caution. His fight with the Kid was a grudge match. Gaunt had sent the Kid to the pen for seven years. Now the Kid had broken out and was hell-bent reckless.

The present circumstances forced him to act now. It was foolhardy and he knew it as he shouldered through the crowd. He stood outside the batwing door a moment, looking over the open tops into the blaze of the saloon's lights to adjust his vision. Then he spit, splayed his hand again and pushed in.

He stepped quietly to the side of the door and stood looking through the slowly waving layers of thick blue smoke, keening the strange quiet of the saloon. Tension and danger hung in the air with the effect of a harsh sound. Four tables of men had stayed at cards, but they were not even seeing the cards they dealt. A number of other men had found excuse to move with their beers to the long side wall. A few had stayed at the bar, strutting their bravado, but they stood grotesquely taut, half crouched, and ready to jump at the first shot.

[*Turn page*]

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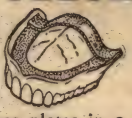

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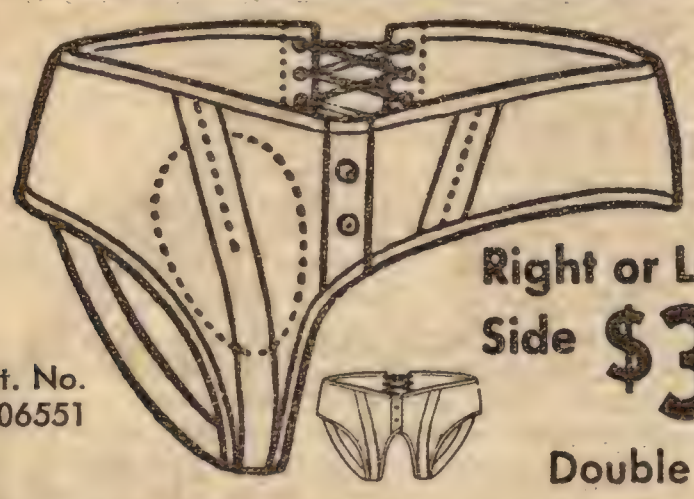

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THE Paiute Kid leaned with his left forearm on the bar, his balance so sensitive that his position was more of a bend than a rest. His right thumb rested like a feather on his belt. Irritation and contempt marked his cruel and vicious face, but his pale blue eyes were watching Oliver in the mirror. He was a man who'd come here for a special reckless reason and now found himself being sidetracked. He didn't like it, but his patience was wearing mighty thin.

Ten feet this side of him, Chris Oliver stood at the bar alone. He stood upright and his knees were stiff and, under his dark range-burn, he was pale as a waning moon. His voice was tight, but he wasn't drunk. He knew just what he was saying, and it was taking cold guts under that tension for him to go on talking.

He said to Donohue, "Don't figure Gaunt will come back until he brings what he went after. He's got more guts than any two-bit gun-slick he ever gunned or jugged. There ain't one yet he ain't made crawl like a yellow pup."

Grudging respect smashed stormily through the sheriff. It was not as any favor to him that Oliver was doing this, but he had the guts to do it for the girl, and he was doing it in such a way as to keep her name out of things. That took both guts and a bigness that Gaunt would never have admitted a man like Oliver could have.

The Paiute Kid sucked a long breath through his teeth. His mouth flattened and went thin. His eyes were bleak and narrowed and his nostrils pinched. Some subtle change of balance showed in his posture although not a muscle seemed to move.

Gaunt sucked in his own long breath and moved out into the light. "Gaunt *is* back!" he rasped. "Stand clear, Oliver!"

The Paiute Kid froze for the briefest instant, then spun on the ball of one foot. He dropped into a half crouch as his hand darted to his gun. He had Gaunt dead-spotted, but Oliver swung out from the bar, blocking the line of fire.

Gaunt heard the Kid's violent curse

as the Kid's gun barked. The shot lifted Oliver and twisted him in midair, but he cleared his gun and answered as he dropped. The Kid winced and cursed again and put another shot at him, but he'd been stung by Oliver's shot and his aim was not good. Oliver twisted like a corkscrew and tried to trigger, but the control had gone out of him and he buckled suddenly to the floor.

The Kid's murderous eyes glinted through space where Oliver had stood. His lips jerked out in a wicked smile and vengeance blazed up through him. "Now you. . . !" he rasped at Gaunt and shot.

The shot smashed Gaunt squarely in the middle. It jarred his solid body, but his hand never stopped its draw. He ripped his gun out and lurched sidewise as the Kid's gun barked again. He felt the shot rip through his side, but he caught his balance. Cold fury filled his eyes, and his own gun belched in unison with the Kid's fast trigger.

The Kid's mouth gaped. For a moment, he didn't move. Then the black hole in the middle of his forehead began to gush and he pitched face down into the slops and sawdust, bounced once, and then did not move.

Gaunt clapped his hand to his belly, lurched over and kicked the gun out of the Kid's hand. He knew the signs. The Kid would never move again. He stood there wavering, looking down at Oliver, still holding his smoking gun.

He muttered low at Oliver, "What gave you this bright idea?"

Mockery showed through Oliver's pain. "Mebbe I just love you, Sheriff!"

Gaunt frowned a minute, then nodded at some tough inward decision and admitted grudgingly, "It was still a brave thing to do. I'll say that to Corrinne."

The taunting mockery washed out of Oliver's face leaving puzzlement in its place. After a moment he said, "Gaunt, you've been mighty hard upon other men. I never figured you'd be as hard upon yourself if the time came."

[*Turn page*]

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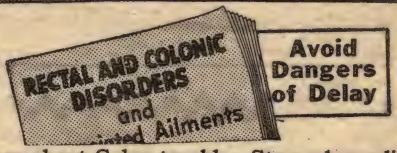

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"Maybe I've been too hard," Gaunt admitted glumly. This was something he had to say, particularly to this man, even if it tore his pride out of him. "Maybe there is such a thing as a little high spirits, or bad company, or smart money that still doesn't make a man yellow or crooked."

He gave Oliver a solid, probing look. "You didn't buy that horse off Tabbert?"

"No," Oliver rasped after a minute. "But I traded it fair. I got it out of a cavvy of sixteen others like it. I got it cheap because somebody figured it would confuse things to have a couple of palominos on the landscape."

"It could have gotten you killed," Gaunt told him.

OLIVER smiled ironically. "You mean with the Jacksons? They ran me off. Said it wasn't my mix."

"That was the final clincher in Gaunt's mind that Oliver had nothing to do with the rustling. He booted his gun. He said on a flatted note, "I wouldn't know about that. There was no other rider with the Jacksons when I got them."

Appreciation dawned in Oliver's eyes. He said, "Gaunt, maybe there is bad company. There won't be no more."

Gaunt nodded understanding. He felt suddenly weak and sat down with a thud in the sawdust. But it wasn't the wound. It was the heart-deep weariness of a man facing the fact he'd been wrong most of his life.

He suddenly noticed the place was raucous with cheers and babble. But it meant nothing to him—it was like the taste of gall.

Doc Sawyer was shouldering through, calling out to give them air. Gaunt nodded toward Oliver.

"Take care of the boy. I can wait."

Doc paused to shoot him a glance of appraisal and then his face wreathed with something deeper than cold respect. It showed affection. He muttered, "There's more than one kind of wrong foot, John," as he started ripping away Oliver's shirt. "Lucky thing the Almighty gave us two

feet so we can change step."

Oliver thought he was talking to him. He said, "I've done changed, Doc."

Gaunt heard that like the roar of an avalanche at a distance. He looked over at Oliver, estimating him, studying him, and suddenly he thought to himself, I believe he did. Right here, tonight. And he's a better man for it. I'll be damned if I'll let a wild buck like that do something I can't!

He grinned suddenly, tough and rough of humor, but feeling better, in a way, than he had in years. The tight pressure was gone, the rigid pull of constant suspicion and contempt and hate had ceased. A sheriff could be tough and still a little tolerant, he guessed. It might make him friends. It might win him a woman. And the world was a drab and lonely place without Corrinne.

Doc finished his examinations. He said, "You both need moving to a bed and nursing. Where do I move you?"

An hour ago, Gaunt would have said, "Jail for Oliver," after his admission of being with the Jacksons. Now he said, "Well, I reckon Corrinne would put us up."

"Both of you?" Doc asked with surprise.

"Why not? We're both friends of her's," Gaunt said.

An odd quiet hung through the crowd. Nobody quite caught the loose ends, but they could feel the change. Kind of funny seeing a wild buckaroo like Chris Oliver getting noble and Sheriff Gaunt turning human—both about another man they should be hating.

Kind of funny, but something for the community to chuckle about too. It would make life a heap sight easier on the range if you had a sheriff you could talk to, and a wild bunch ready to stand in a pinch on the side of law. This was one story wouldn't need any building—even though there'd be plenty of unanswered curiosity about the change.

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